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IMPERIAL RICHENDA

A FANTASTIC COMEDY



IMPERIAL RICHENDA

A FANTASTIC COMEDY

BY

ROSAMOND LANGBRIDGE

AUTHOR OF "THE FLAME AND FLOOD"
AND "THE STARS BEYOND"



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IMPERIAL RICHENDA

I

AS Mrs. Roche entered the hall of Roche's Imperial Hotel, she caught sight of a waiter, and raised her voice.

"I want tea for four," she declaimed, rustling rapidly towards the coffee-room. "I want the best you have, and I want you to go to Mr. Roche and tell him *I'm* here."

Her voice abated, as, pushing the door open, she discovered that the coffee-room was empty, and her triumphal entry balked of its effect. Hard on her heels followed Miss Asphodel Roche, equally rustling, equally declamatory; behind her, the governess, Miss Birkett, with a young Roche by the hand.

The waiter would scarcely have been human if he had not trembled and grown pale.

"Yes, madam," he replied. "Whom shall I say?"

Miss Birkett smiled, but more in pity than in anger.

"Mrs. *Roche!*" the lady said.

"He's new to these parts," said Asphodel, condoning the man's fault. Mrs. Roche looked round her over her fat shoulder.

"So this," she commented, "is your father's latest speculation!"

Asphodel returned, before the waiter had left the room, with a pretty sententiousness, which had done damage with a subaltern or two, and since then had been adopted as her special pose: "And I think he should know better than to speculate in men with corns!"

She spoke with a pleased assurance of her humour, bred by good looks, good clothes, and her position as the eldest daughter.

Miss Birkett—imported from England for the advantage of a Midland accent—knew the perils of her situation better than to leave unnoticed the least attempt at wit made by that clique of her employers on whose side the power lay. She laughed with covert appreciation.

"So this," repeated Mrs. Roche again, "is the Imperial Hotel!" She laughed at her daughter and the governess behind her hand.

"Though if you ask *me*," said Asphodel, "I don't see anything particularly Imperial about it."

As Mr. Roche came into the coffee-room, a cigarette between his lips, his wife rose, and peered at the chair on which she had been sitting.

"I wonder if the chairs are clean!" she said.

Miss Birkett, whose every movement was a reflex action of Mrs. Roche, rose to inspect her own.

"Welcome," said old Roche—his tones tremulous with anxiety, holding an open paper in his hand, his high-crowned bowler-hat pushed far back on his forehead—"to the

Impeer-yal Hotel! And now isn't it a shame for ye," he added with gently veiled reproach, "that ye wouldn't come to inspect it before?"

They all turned, and looked at him, giggling. The youngest Miss Roche, nicknamed the "Fluke," too young at seven to perceive the joke, burst out laughing to show that she could understand.

"What ails the chairs?" he said uneasily.

Asphodel looked at her mother. "*Ye!*" she said. "I think his accent gets commoner every day!"

"We were only admiring the mahogany," said Mrs. Roche, winking at Miss Birkett, who winked back. "And why do you wear your hat in the house, Solly?" She sat down again. "So vulgar before ladies!"

Solomon Roche removed his hat immediately. "I suppose bein' used to wearin' it in the factory," he said.

They exchanged looks of contempt, combined with alarm.

"He's smoking one of Roche's Cigarettes, I do declare," said Asphodel. "I always know them by the horrid smell. If there's one thing worse," she said to Miss Birkett, nodding her head, and lowering her voice, "than Roche's Imperial Hotel, it's Roche's Cigarettes!"

"Asphodel! Asphodel!" cried the delighted Birkett.

The old man removed his cigarette from his lips, and looked at it tenderly.

"What's wrong with the scent of it, pet?" he said with solicitude. "No pains are spared to make it a high class article—it's the choicest blend of——"

"Never mind that now, Solly," said Mrs. Roche. "If

you get him on to his old tobacco," she said to Asphodel, in a most audible aside, "he'll talk all day."

Old Roche held back the eulogy which was pouring to his lips, and approached his wife. "Well, what will ye be having, me dear?" he said anxiously. "The Impeer-yal only asks to be let do its best."

"Well, now," returned his wife, "we'll just see what its best *is*."

Old Roche rattled his paper feverishly. "Karl!" he called. "Where's that lad? He's a Swiss garsong—an' a splendid waiter."

"Irish gossoon, more like it!" said Asphodel.

"What's a garsong?" enquired the youngest Miss Roche, tugging Miss Birkett's hand. Miss Birkett blushed, and glanced at Mrs. Roche.

"You should know better, Margaret, than to ask such a question. I am ashamed of you; you're a very ignorant little girl," she said.

From Miss Birkett's phrasing, accompanied by her blush, the youngest Miss Roche gathered that garsong was something which was not to be mentioned. She raised her voice. "What's a garsong?" she said, trusting to provide an entertainment.

"She should be getting on with her *French*, Birkie," Mrs. Roche said pointedly.

"She knows it perfectly well, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie with warmth. "It's nothing but obstinacy."

Old Roche, who had left the room, came back. "'Tis comin', me dear," he said. "One minute now, and ye

shall partake of the Impeer-yal bounty. Only you c'ot us unprepared, we'd have had something better than this, an' not to be keepin' you perishin' for a cup o' tea. We're slack of hands — our waitress left us suddenly."

Asphodel, trustful of a scandal, enquired: "What was it?"

"A chumour in the ear, poor girl," replied old Roche. His reply was received with a burst of laughter from the three. At this moment they all turned, as a slide in the wall shot up, framing the figure of a heated cook, with glimpses of a kitchen underneath the arms she raised.

"What's that, Birkie?" the Fluke enquired.

"A buttery-hatch, dear," Birkie answered in indisputable tones.

"Buttery-hatches have gone out," said Asphodel decisively.

"A good dodge for keepin' food warm," her father answered, going towards the tray, which the waiter brought towards them on one hand.

Asphodel drew in her chair. "A sudden jump of one of those corns, now," she said to Birkie, pursing her pretty lips to keep back her pleasure in her wit, "and where would our buttered toast be!"

"Trust to fair weather, Asphodel," said Birkie, with a capping wit.

In the meantime Mrs. Roche was examining the plates.

"If there's one thing, next to vulgarity, I can't bear,

it's *dirt*," she said, pointing to a rim. "I never eat jam, and why jam should be given me, when I haven't asked for jam, apart from the question that I prefer *my* jam to some one else's jam——"

"Garsong!" said old Roche unhappily, "some clean plates!"

"Mother!" said Asphodel's younger sister, with an air of sage discovery, "the flowers on this table are dead."

Birkie squeezed her hand. "Hush, Margaret, you're a very forward little girl."

"Well, I never knew such a room for flies!" said Asphodel. "There's one been sitting on father's forehead for an age, and he never takes a bit of notice."

"I expect he's got used to them by now," said her mother.

"I hate a person who lets a fly sit on them," said Asphodel. "It shows such a commonness. No, if you were to pay me for it, I couldn't touch that toast."

"It would be a charity if they'd melt the butter on it," said her mother.

"Mother, I don't like my tea," said Asphodel's younger sister, twisting in her chair.

Old Roche looked in misery from one face to the other. "Well, I'm sorry now," he said with deep feeling, "that you're all so disappointed over it. But, sure, I've only taken it over this couple o' weeks. You took us at an awkward time, bein' short of servants, and changin' the management."

"D'you ever have any one to stop?" said Asphodel.

"Oh, it wouldn't be so bad," said Mrs. Roche, "if the place wasn't falling to bits."

"If you ask *me*, father," said Asphodel, knitting away at a silk necktie which she had taken from a bag, "it's all right for commercial travellers and people who aren't refined, but don't ask *me* to stop in it."

"Mr. Roche is getting quite a wrong impression," Birkie boldly said; "he thinks we're not pleased with the Imperial——"

"Heaven knows what the beds'd be like," murmured Mrs. Roche to her daughter.

Old Roche flushed suddenly, as he straightened himself to stand his ground.

"Well, now, if it's not good enough for you, it's good enough for *somebody!*" he said. "He makes no complaints. He don't object to the beds: he don't mind the flowers and flies. I leave you to guess who I mean."

"Somebody travelling in tea, I daresay," said Asphodel.

"Is he a *gentleman?*" said Mrs. Roche in the sacred tone which she used always for that word.

"He has his own vallet with him," said Mr. Roche. He chuckled and glared triumphantly about him, for at last, he felt, he held the stage.

"Then what in the name o' fortune is he doing at *Roche's?*" said his wife.

"Such a name!" added her daughter.

"Well, pet," returned her father, "it's suited my fam'ly for some generations, but if it doesn't suit you, there's

only one cure for that—change it! And now's your chance. What's that?" He turned to the waiter, who had come back to the room. "Someone wantin' me on the 'phone? One moment!" he said to his assembled family, held up a hand, and went out at the door.

"Now, I'm just going to find out who it *is* that he's so proud of," Asphodel announced. "Here, waiter, is there anyone who's anybody stopping in this place?"

The man glanced round at the three faces, and gathered from them what Miss Roche desired to know.

"There's Sir Anthony Amersham, miss," he began, holding to a chair back, one arm akimbo, and his left leg balanced on tiptoe against the right.

"*What!*" said Mrs. Roche. A dead silence fell.

"Fancy—fancy *him* being here!" said Birkie, the comprehensive, underneath her breath.

Asphodel stopped her knitting. "Did you ever!" she said, fixing her mother with wide eyes.

"Well, now, I'll tell what we'll do," Mrs. Roche said. "It'd be a perfect charity to provide some decent society for him——"

At this moment, old Roche returned with a manner of defiant success. Before he could speak, his wife rose to her feet.

"After all," she said, "I've taken rather a fancy to the Imperial: there's something taking about it."

"It's rough, but it's homely," Asphodel said eagerly.

"It'd give you a kind of send-off if you'd some decent

people seen about the place," continued Mrs. Roche. "It's healthy on account o' the sea, and a rest from housekeeping'd be a treat to me. I've decided," she said firmly, "to stop here a bit, for the credit of the place, though it's not necessary to tell every one that I'm Mrs. Roche of the Imperial. D'you hear me?"

"As you like, me dear," old Roche replied, watching every word that came from her lips. "Ye'd best go book your rooms, for we're filling up. I've just had a conversation with the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte on the 'phone: she's booked three bedrooms for herself and daughter and the lady's maid."

There was a cry from Asphodel. "*She's* not coming! Well, it's just like her——"

Mrs. Roche's eyes sought the corners of the room, in rapid cogitation. An expression of annoyance was replaced by one of plotting, which in its turn gave way to satisfaction.

"Be quiet!" she said to Asphodel. "What harm! It's the very thing. I see it all. It's a perfect——"

Again the subtle Birkie understood. "I call it an intervention of Providence," she said firmly.

Mrs. Roche caught at her husband's arm, and pointed him to the door. "Go book three rooms before they're taken," she said commandingly, "and a double-bedded one for Birkie and the Fluke. There's going to be a rush on this place, Solly."

When the old man, flustered and flattered, had gone away again, she sank down in her chair with a flump.

"It's the hand of Providence—Mrs. Vandravarte coming here, Asphodel," she said.

"I'm not so sure," said Asphodel obstinately. "I'll bet you she's heard that Sir Anthony is here, and is tracking him down for that Moira."

Birkie's eyes glistened comprehendingly.

"Pshaw!" said her mother. "Men hate her: she's so conceited, and you're twice her style."

"She's *no* style," said Birkie, "and she can't do her hair a bit."

"Only for Mrs. Vandravarte," said Asphodel, pouting, "we'd have had him all to ourselves."

"Listen to you!" said Mrs. Roche, "and you furious when she never returned my call, and when I met her, told a story about being a bad caller. She can't *avoid* us. We shall get into her set."

"The best set in town. She knows all the officers, Asphodel," said Birkie.

"You know quite well you never let me have a bit of peace, until I called," her mother said.

"And you never know what mayn't come out of being friendly with good people," corroborated Birkie.

Mrs. Roche turned upon her with immense approval. "Exactly, Birkie," she said. "Listen to me—Fitzjur'ld's coming home to-night. Throw *him* together with Moira Vandravarte—and——"

Asphodel's eyes brightened.

"And the coast'd be clear for you and Sir Anthony," Asphodel added, in her own mind, to herself.

"They know simply everybody," Mrs. Roche whispered to Birkie, "but it's well known they want *money!*" She nodded her head, and repeated "Throw them together——"

"Fitzy's a fool. He can't stand ladies," said Asphodel. "He'd prefer a barmaid any day. He's the true son of his father, he's so contrairy."

Mrs. Roche rose, brushed the crumbs from her lap, and counted off her plans upon her fingers.

"There's *one* thing: Mrs. Vandravarte doesn't come till to-night. We're before her. I don't stir from this place. Sir Anthony dines with us to-night. I shall 'phone out at once to town for our dresses to come on this evening. At the same time," she said, with glittering eyes, "leaving word for Fitzy to come on here——"

"The talent you have for construction, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie, "is something marvellous!"

"What's 'struction?" whimpered the Fluke, who was tired.

"Something you may hope to have when you are older, dear, if you're good," returned the governess.

"I wish Mrs. Vandravarte joy," said Asphodel, "of the old flowers, black toast, and dead flies!"

At this moment old Roche re-entered the room.

"It's a pity the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte chose to be comin' at this time," he said, "an' we short of a waitress, but we must only do the best we can; we must only do the best we can."

At this juncture Karl approached the proprietor of the

Imperial Hotel. "I've shown a young woman into the office," he said, "that's come about the place of parlour-maid. The manager's out, so would you see her, sir?"

Old Roche turned round and faced his family.

"Well," he said, "there's luck for you!"

"It's what *I* call the hand of Providence!" repeated Birkie.

II

THE dresses, for which Mrs. Roche had telephoned to her town house, had arrived from Dublin by a special messenger. Trampling, rustling, swishing up the stairs, the three ladies had begun the retreat to their three rooms. On the way there, they called to each other over the stair-head; they communicated to each other their impressions of the Imperial Hotel in shouts; they pulled doors open, and apologised with giggles to the inhabitants thereof, whom they surprised in various unsuspecting attitudes. In other words, they had taken over the Imperial Hotel, and it was well that this should be borne in upon its visitors as early and as forcibly as possible. Those already acquainted with the fact of who they were would then be able to account for their proceedings; those unaware would shortly understand. Arrived in their bedchambers, they removed their outdoor clothes with their doors open, and continued to shout plans and impressions across the intervening space.

The view from Mrs. Roche's window was a triangle of the hotel yard, and comprised in a short area a dog-kennel, a hen-coop, and a manure heap. She was, however, far

too happy to be inconvenienced by rising odours, cackles, and occasional yelps.

The month, though May, was cold. She crouched in her petticoat before the set fire in the grate, and, flattened on the floor, her head upon one side, was administering paper and matches to its sequent needs. At this point, her daughter came into the room, and she, too, was in her petticoat. Asphodel had come to ask her mother "what way she should do her hair." Together they knelt down before the grate, and, with inverted heads, aided the progress of the flames with alternately puffed cheeks.

"I've written a note to Sir Anthony, Asphodel," said Mrs. Roche, between her puffs. "He was out, but they'll give it him directly he comes in."

"Birkie's perfectly right," declared her daughter, "you've certainly a genius for construction, mother. We'll just take over this place, and have a real old time of it. You and Mrs. Vandravarte'll be sure to become great; Fitzy can flirt round with that Moira, if he likes, and I tell you what I was thinking: it'd be a charity to ask out Mr. O'Fanelly or one of the curates of an afternoon for Birkie. I don't see why poor governesses shouldn't have good times like us, sometimes. It'd keep Birkie out of harm's way: I don't believe she's beyond going in for Fitzjur'ld or Sir Anthony himself."

"My dear Asphodel, she's the *governess!*" said Mrs. Roche. She sat up and dusted her hands together with a clap. "And I don't intend to give Birkie the chance of

getting married, curate or no curate. Just when she's settled. I don't want to part with Birkie: Birkie suits me very well——"

A tap came to the door, and old Roche entered his wife's room, to receive a rapid impression of the back view of his wife and daughter, flattened on the floor. He fixed his childish blue eyes steadily, but stealthily, on his wife: there was triumph, discomfort, and a grain of fear in them.

"Now, Solly, what have you been up to?" she exclaimed. "You look as if you'd done something to be ashamed of."

"I've engaged her, me dear," said old Roche.

"Engaged who?" said Asphodel—such was the grateful result of Birkie's struggles with Hughes' Grammar upon her impressionable youth. "More likely engaged *to* her,—that's what he looks like, any way."

"The new waitress," said old Roche, with a flushed cheek.

"What's her name?" said his wife.

"Rich—Richenda, I think she said, or some name that way."

"*Richenda!*" echoed Mrs. Roche. "There isn't such a name. Richenda what?"

"Well, really, me love, I didn't enquire that."

"Oh, isn't that just like you!" she answered, rising. "Well, did you read her characters?"

"Well, no, me love," he said, "she hadn't got a character."

"It looks very like it," said Mrs. Roche, and she and her daughter burst out laughing.

"But she's a very, I may say a very personable-looking young person——"

"Evidently, Solly!" said his wife: "you ought to know better than go and get a personable young person without a character."

"Well, wait now, till I tell you the reason, Maria," answered old Roche, with the nearest approach to testiness of which his childlike nature was capable. "She was never, she tells me, in a place before," he added firmly. They laughed still louder. "With the exception," he continued, "of bein' with a Duchess."

"Oh, yes, I like that!" said Mrs. Roche, wiping her eyes. "But I daresay she didn't say *what* Duchess."

"Well, now, you're right," old Roche said with increasing firmness, "but I've no doubt, no doubt in the world, if you asked her, she'd tell you what Duchess."

"She's just come round him," Asphodel remarked to her mother, "that's about it."

"No fool like an old fool," rejoined her mother, searching for a pin with which to close her petticoat.

"No, but 'pon me word, if you saw her appearance!" he urged. "She'll be a credit, I tell you, a *credit* to the Impeeryal."

"She's the kind of girl that'll bring a lot of common boys about the place," said Asphodel, unfastening a curling-pin.

"Solly looks as if he had a secret," his wife called out. "He's blushing!"

"Well, no, then," old Roche said, standing his ground

like a soldier, under this fusillade of mockery, "for I said to her—somethin' about the per'ls of her situation—an' wasn't she too good lookin', an' she told me—she told me she permitted no liberties."

"I believe father's been kissing her," said Asphodel tranquilly; "you'd best keep an eye on him, mother."

Old Roche fixed an eye on both of them, in which trust and reproach were wavering. He tried to laugh, but blushed again instead.

"Well, mind my words," he said, his hand upon the door. "Wait till ye see her—an' then ye may judge if Richenda's not the best day's work I've done yet."

And he bolted out of the room.

"Father's getting softer every day," said his daughter with assured composure. "She's twisted him round her finger: she's the kind of girl that Fitzy'll be after—he'd rather a servant than a lady any day."

"Fitzjur'ld——" her mother began at the top of her voice.

A knock came to the door; this time it was very soft. "Oh, come in then!" she said angrily.

"I have brought you the hot water, madam," said a clear-cut voice. They started and turned round.

"Who are you?" said Mrs. Roche.

The girl crossed the floor with firm, swift steps, carrying with her an aroma of self-confidence so complete as to be almost crushing. Mrs. Roche and her daughter felt immediately aware of curling-pins and petticoats.

"Richenda!" the girl answered. Her voice was as rich as her name. They stared at her, scratching their bare arms.

"Do you know, you're not half bad looking, Richenda," observed Asphodel, after a pause, in lowered tones, and with her assured impertinence.

As she lifted the jug from the basin, to make room for the hot water, Richenda's colour neither rose, nor did her lashes fall.

"You are very kind, madam," she said quietly.

They had never seen a servant with such an air before.

"Don't you find this place very *rough*?" Mrs. Roche enquired; and all her condemnation of the waitress was heard melting in her voice.

"Oh no, madam," replied Richenda. "I think the Imperial's *quite* a nice little place."

From the quiet way in which she spoke this "quite" they knew conclusively, it was no lie that her first place had been with the Duchess.

They continued to stare inquisitively at her, at her fine chestnut hair arranged originally beneath a cap of an original cut; her straight figure, the healthy beaming of her blue-grey eyes, her deft and pretty fingers.

"Mr. Roche tells me you were with some *Duchess* before," Mrs. Roche remarked interrogatively.

"Yes, madam," said Richenda, looking straight before her.

"Let me see," the lady continued, "er—*which* Duchess?"

Richenda hesitated. "If you don't mind me not saying, I would rather not be forced to, madam," she said after a pause. "You see,"—she looked steadily at Mrs. Roche,—"it was rather—a notorious affair."

"Oh, I *see!*" said Mrs. Roche in cowed but comprehending tones. She winked at Richenda; for it would never do to seem not to have heard the recent scandal of a notorious Duchess.

"You know!—You see, madam," said the girl confidingly, "on account of me knowing a good deal about it, it wouldn't be fair to her Grace." She took up the empty hot water-can. "I was very fond of her Grace: she was very good to me!" Richenda said. "I have not a word to say against her Grace."

At the door she turned. "Shall I ask your maid to come to you, if you are ready, madam?"

"We haven't got——" Mrs. Roche began.

"We're doing without a maid just now," said Asphodel.

When she had closed the door, with gradual softness, they turned to each other with open mouths.

"Who would have thought the old man had so much sense in him!" Mrs. Roche exclaimed, unaware of parodying Macbeth.

"Fancy her being with a Duchess!" Asphodel gasped. "I wonder—which? Wait till you see if I don't worm the scandal out of her!"

"Evidently used to the best people."

"If you ask *me*, she's downright smart. We could come round her to give us some tips——"

"Well, now, I'm glad Mrs. Vandravarte should just see we know what's what."

"Quite a manner!"

"Mind you," said Mrs. Roche, "the kind of girl you could *trust*."

III

SIR ANTHONY AMERSHAM had been known for some time to the Roches as a man about town (by which they meant Dublin) who carried with himself the wherewithal to enter every clique and set. By breeding, by education, and by means, he belonged to Dublin Castle. His excellent society, and elegant taste for cards and company, gave him the *entrée* to that "set" which is recruited from the military and the legal professions. Since he wrote poems after the manner of Rossetti, who, he declared, returned to earth at moments, for the purpose of dictating to Sir Anthony things otherwise not to be expressed in that atmosphere in which he now found himself; since he painted figures which appeared in dreams to him, and had an inveterate objection to showing him their feet—the artists and the poets recognised him as one of themselves. Nor were the mystics in the least exclusive with him, for he could penetrate the most obstinate of symbols, and apportioned different-coloured auras to every one he met. He wrote plays, which he carried round in his coat-pocket to tea-parties, and read aloud, imparting different cadences of voice to all his "persons of the play";

so that, what with his varied audience and unvarying applause, there was no need to put it to the further test and publicity of the theatre. Or else, he issued invitations to orgies of his own devising, at which everybody had to appear as heroes of mythology or history, Sir Anthony more usually reserving to himself the characters of Cuchullain and Marc Antony. He was thus a man of varied experience and interests, and of most versed and impartial outlook; so much so, that it was difficult to tell for which of his many friends, his many interests, he most cared; or if the secret of the multiplicity of both lay in the fact that he was indifferent to all.

At the present time he had been indisposed, and suffering, as he said, "in right royal fashion, from a surfeit, neither of lampreys, nor of peaches and new ale—but from a plethora of parties." He had decided suddenly that it was in solitude alone that the soul could develop individuality, and expand. Solomon Roche had not taken over the Imperial Hotel (situate at a small watering-place, within a tram-ride of the town) longer than a week, before it struck Sir Anthony to try, for the first time, the emotional experience of a tram-ride. He discovered the Imperial Hotel. He was wearied to the soul of "Castle" people, but when he had tested his teeth for a few days on Imperial chops, he knew that he was safe from *them*. He was bored to death by the artistic set; but had no sooner scanned his bill (which might have been that of a Brighton hotel in the season) for one night's unrest, than he knew well the artists *could* not trouble him.

In seven days he found that his soul had developed such proportions, that it was scarcely safe to stay there a day longer. Sir Anthony had just begun to waver between the undeniable spiritual advantages derived from indigestion, and the equally irrefutable material benefit obtainable from a spring mattress, when the Roche family arrived.

He was divided between desire to investigate that section of humanity with which he was the least acquainted—the wealthy Irish middle class—and desire to fly before the specimens of its many voices which reached him already in the passages, when Mrs. Roche's invitation to dine with them reached him. It struck him as unpardonable impertinence, until the name of Mrs. Roche's daughter, Asphodel, whom she had mentioned, caught his eye, and its unusualness reminded him that he had met them once, somewhere and somehow, some day—a good while ago.

At half-past seven the party had filed into the dining-room—chattering, gesticulating, and giving the sprinkling of visitors to the hotel a cowed impression that they were doing something common and improper in publicly consuming food at the Imperial. Each of the Roches noticed with astonishment, but dared not comment on, the change that had come over the coffee-room of the Imperial. There were new muslin curtains hung up, since their tea two hours ago. Bowls of living flowers were upon the tables, which were set forth with professional skill, and had devices carried out in ivy leaves upon their cloths. It was difficult to say precisely what the metamorphosis had been, but the aspect of the room was as strikingly dissimilar to its pre-

vious state, as the face of a jilted woman is, compared to that of a girl who is engaged.

Solomon Roche, feverish with pride in his hotel, his family, and his distinguished visitor, practically forced Sir Anthony into his chair next Mrs. Roche.

"I'm sure Sir Ranthony is famishin' for his dinner," he said.

Suddenly a voice came from the door at the far end of the room: "And the last state of that man was worse than the first!"

"Fitzjur'ld!" cried his mother.

"I knew I'd be welcome, for I made sure you'd not wait for me!" remarked Fitzgerald Roche, seating himself by Miss Birkett.

"My son, Fitzjur'ld," said Mrs. Roche, "come over from England this morning."

"Plucked for everything," added Asphodel.

"Sir Ranthony Amersham!" said Mr. Roche. "Sir Ranthony's a distinguished po'te and painter, and—and—has sat opposite, as we're doin' to-night, all the distinguished lit'ry and artistic people round 'bout Dublin."

"Well, here's a new type for him to sit opposite," said Fitzy calmly, tapping his chest; "a distinguished fool."

"I feel sure," said Sir Anthony, smiling his enigmatical smile, "you overestimate your distinction."

"Fitzjur'ld," said Mrs. Roche, "began by doing everything and ended by doing nothing."

"My plight, Mr. Roche, is far worse," said Amersham,

addressing Fitzgerald, "for I began by doing nothing, and have ended by doing everything, and consequently getting nothing done."

"You go to swell the vast ranks of the Unemployed, Sir Anthony," murmured the invariably approving Birkie.

"Exactly, Miss Birkett. It's so idle being employed, when one can be so much better occupied."

At this moment Richenda appeared, walking with rapidity and grace, with the soup-plates in her hands.

"I wonder you can find occupation in a hole like the Imperial," said Asphodel. She had got hold of an impression that all fashionable people ran down the members of their family, and everything belonging to them. Sir Anthony was just beginning to wonder how he could turn this awkward moment into grace, when Birkie cut in with skill:

"How long shall you be remaining here, Sir Anthony?"

"Alas!" said he, shrugging his shoulders pitifully. "I fear I am a bird of——"—he looked up and beheld Richenda—"fixture!" he ended, looking hard at her.

"H'm, new breed!" Fitzgerald said. "King present 'em to the Dublin Zoo?" He, too, looked up, and followed Sir Anthony's eyes. He nudged Asphodel. "Who's that, Asp?"

Old Mr. Roche looked guilty, and cast down his eyes.

"The waitress, Fitzy," she answered aloud.

"H'm, what's her name? Eh? Eh, what's her name?" Fitzgerald pursued. The eyes of the whole party rested

on Richenda, as she moved between them delicately, a curious mixture of that deferential disembodiment essential to good servants, with the complete equipment of assurance essential to strong personalities.

"Here's the Vandravartes, mother," Asphodel whispered, looking towards the far end of the room, as a large woman in rustling silk, followed by her daughter, came towards a table, lower down, but opposite the Roches.

The Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte bore the stamp of permanent insolence which is the sole instrument of power an ignorant and unattractive woman of family can wield. But for this irrefutable hall-mark of good breeding, everybody would have passed her by as being what she was, uncultured, and diffusing a palpable atmosphere of antipathy. In the fact that she was a Vandravarte her culture lay. What more could possibly be needed? There was principle, too, in her scorning of sympathetic wiles; for her stamp of countenance won respect for her without exertion on her part, amongst the people of significance, and caused those persons to avoid her with whom she desired no contact. On seeing Sir Anthony at the Roche's table, she raised her eyebrows at all of them, then favoured him with a differentiating smile, in which coldness at his choice of friends mixed with encouragement to meet with better. To the assembled Roches she inclined a smileless face.

"The Hon. Mrs. Vandravarte and her daughter," Birkie announced glowingly, just as Sir Anthony slightly rose, acknowledging her salutation.

Mrs. Roche turned to Sir Anthony on one side of her. "Such a pity that girl has a skin like a norange!" she said. "I think it spoils a girl."

To Fitzgerald, on her other side, she whispered, "Such a sweet little thing, Fitzy! Men rave about her."

"I should say that 'rave's' the right word," said Fitzgerald in far-reaching tones. "When they come to their senses, they won't."

"I consider the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte handsome," Birkie said.

"Very distangy," added Mrs. Roche.

"I don't like her aura. It's like a London fog," said Sir Anthony.

Old Roche was arrested. "What's that you don't like?" he said, bending forward.

"Her *aura*, father," Asphodel repeated. She had not the faintest notion what it meant.

"Asphodel don't know what it means," said Fitzgerald calmly. "It's the soup-plates that saints have round their heads, like the tinsel fringes you find in boxes of Elvas plums."

"Fitzy, don't be profane," said his mother, uncertain of the security of Sir Anthony's religious views.

In the meantime Richenda was waiting at the Vandravarte table. Mrs. Vandravarte looked up at her and said, "Is Sir Anthony Amersham staying here?"

"Yes, madam."

"Is he dining with those—people?"

"Yes, madam."

Mrs. Vandravarte looked at her daughter, who returned the look. They both laughed, low in their throats.

"That's the worst of a place like this," said Mrs. Vandravarte, "one is obliged to meet such—*people*."

"It's improved to what it was the last time I was here," said Moira. "I wonder has the management changed hands?" she added to Richenda. Both Mrs. Vandravarte and her daughter stared at the smart waitress.

"Yes, madam, the management is new."

Richenda slipped away to the Roche table.

"Oh, tell me what *my* aura's like," Mrs. Roche was saying.

Sir Anthony shaded his eyes with one hand. "It seems to be a kind of purplish red," he said extremely gravely.

"A napoplectic halo, I s'pose," old Roche suggested, chuckling at his wit.

"But there's somebody in this room," Sir Anthony remarked under his breath, "with a most powerful aura—a golden one!"

At that moment Richenda set boiled tongue and chickens on the table.

"Oh, do tell us *who?*" said Asphodel.

Sir Anthony shook his head, pursing his lips. As Richenda moved away, in answer to a tapping at the buttery-hatch, he nodded his head in her direction:

"That girl!" he said.

They all turned to stare at her in astonishment.

"*I* can see nothing," Asphodel remarked, vaguely annoyed.

"She's been with a Duchess!" whispered Mrs. Roche.

"Ah!" said Sir Anthony profoundly, turning to Mrs Roche, "that might account for it."

"This is the worst cooked dinner I ever ate in my life, Asphodel murmured. She was resolved Sir Anthony should see that Richenda was not the sole testimony to the elegance of their discerning taste. "I hate a hot tongue. It's not a good tongue, either."

"It's the tongue of men and of angels she's wanting," Fitzy remarked.

Asphodel looked up. "It was the worst day's work you ever did in your life, mother," she remarked with her demure deliberation, "to bring Fitzgerald into the world."

Mrs. Roche and Birkie burst out laughing behind the napkins they raised to their lips. Everyone but Fitzy darted a look at Sir Anthony, to see how he would take it.

"Asphodel, I'm ashamed of you," said Birkie, as soon as she could speak.

"It was such waste of time," continued Asphodel, delighted with herself, "and I can't bear waste."

"Only when it's nineteen inches, with some one's arm around it, I suppose," added old Roche, chuckling. "Isn't that it, eh?" Nobody listened to him.

"Because," Fitzgerald said, looking across at Asphodel, as he produced nuts from his pocket, and cracked them with his teeth, "it's these important issues, as we call 'em, that invariably miss fire; whereas the results of the side issues are incalculable."

"Very well put, Mr. Fitzgerald," Birkie said.

"Don't call me Mr. Fitzgerald," answered Fitzy cheerfully, darting a look at his mother, "call me Fitzy!"

"I think we'd better leave the gentlemen," Mrs. Roche said, rising with a flash of majesty.

Sir Anthony opened the door for them, as the three ladies passed out. Birkie inclined her head to him profoundly. Asphodel shot him a side-glance from between thick lashes.

IV

AS they filed into the drawing-room, talking at the highest pitch of their voices, they discovered that Mrs. Vandravarte and her daughter had drawn the two arm-chairs of the room so exactly in front of the fire, that to catch a glance of it was impossible. They looked round, as the Roches entered, and continued to keep up their murmuring, with their backs turned to them. The Roches hovered chillily in the background, making strained remarks about the coldness of the evening. Finally Mrs. Roche advanced, with an enormous pleasantry.

"How are you, Mrs. Vandravarte? Such a charity to have a fire! You have met my daughter Asphodel, about the same age as yours—this is Miss Birkett, the governess."

The Vandravartes shook hands with the Roches, and bowed to Miss Birkett.

"I'm such a wretched caller," said Mrs. Vandravarte repellently. "I believe I never returned your call, Mrs. Roche."

"Come, this is most encouraging!" Mrs. Roche said to herself. To Mrs. Vandravarte she replied with ingratiating movements. "What matter! I hope you and I will

know each other better than to expect the observance of such formalities."

Mrs. Vandravarte silently turned down her lips.

"Now, will you think me frightfully rude," continued Mrs. Roche, "but I *must* comment on that exquisite old buckle in your dress."

Mrs. Vandravarte visibly relaxed a little. "Do you admire it?" she said impassively, trying to look down at it over her own bosom.

"It's simply exquisite," said Asphodel and Birkie together.

Moira had turned to Asphodel. "How did you find out this hole?" she said.

There was a moment's pause: Miss Birkett breathed hard, and rolled her eyes. Then:

"How did *you*?" said Asphodel brightly, while the Roche party exchanged momentous glances.

"We—heard of it," said Miss Vandravarte insolently. "We came here to avoid—callers."

Mrs. Roche had turned aside a moment to control her face. It was one thing to discuss, yourself, a speculation in which your husband had invested money—money you might have had the spending of—another to listen to that speculation sneered at by persons into whose set one could not penetrate. Had it not been for Asphodel's sake, for whom she wanted to reach at Sir Anthony through his friends, the Vandravartes; had it not been for Fitzgerald, and for her own desire to enter the charmed Vandravarte circle;—Mrs. Roche would have given the Begum a good

piece of her mind, which was a place of dragons and the deep.

In the same moment Asphodel, who was her mother's child, had come to the conclusion that they would find out soon enough to whom the Imperial Hotel belonged. In the meantime, it was well to act as though "Roche's" were less to them than to the Vandravartes, until the hour had come when the invisible bargain between position and wealth had been sealed past revoke. Besides, to betray one's feelings, she assured herself, was not well-bred.

Mrs. Vandravarte continued. "Extr'ordin'ry! Did you ever eat such a dinner in your life!"

"Never," Mrs. Roche said warmly, and with a highly coloured giggle. "All we must do," she added, "is herd together"—she described a close circle with her hand—"and make it as bearable for each other as we can."

This time it was the Vandravartes who looked at each other underneath their lashes.

"There's only one thing that's decent in the place," said Mrs. Vandravarte to Mrs. Roche, after a pause, "and that's the waitress. She's of a decent stamp."

"Yes, I wonder how long she'll stay," said Mrs. Roche.

"You can see she wears a good corset," said Birkie to Mrs. Roche.

"She's much too good for such a hole. That girl's been used to good houses," continued Mrs. Vandravarte. "I pity her in such a place. I could do with a girl like that myself. I shall try and dissatisfy her, and get her to come to me."

Pride at Mrs. Vandravarte's discernment of their discrimination had swelled high in Mrs. Roche, together with her estimation of Richenda, when at this point it mixed turbulently with revolt, and the pride succumbed. She resolved with anger to warn Richenda against the wiles of Mrs. Vandravarte. Just then, the strained affectation of indifference in the two girls, to the absence of the men, turned, as they saw them entering the room, into a sudden warmth towards each other.

"Oh, I want you to know my son, Fitzjur'ld, Mrs. Vandravarte," said Mrs. Roche; "he's an original, quite a caution."

"Being a caution's his sole accomplishment," his sister added.

"Though Fitzjur'ld," continued his mother, with a look at Asphodel, "has been under *no* necessity to acquire accomplishments, being his uncle's sole heir"—she paused —"I can't say I approve of young men brought up to think their expectations their profession. Not that," she ended, "I even found it come against him in society——"

But Mrs. Vandravarte was candidly not listening.

The three men advanced towards the ladies, bearing the different aspects which the same set of circumstances had produced upon three different natures. Old Mr. Roche looked anxious to please everyone, and uncertain of his own capacity for it. Fitzgerald Roche trod the floor with all the appearance of a man who had received material or spiritual refreshment on the way. Sir Anthony was languid, but assured.

Something struck Mrs. Roche, and she rose and met her husband half-way to the fire. "Come and look out of this window, Solly," she observed, with studied carelessness; "there's such a pretty view!"

The old man feared lest he had done amiss, and followed her uneasily, while his wife drew aside the curtain, and pretended to look out. "Mind, now," she said, "you needn't mention either Roche's Twist or Roche's Imperial Hotel."

Fitzgerald glanced at them with a devil in his eye.

"What's that about Twist?" he said, in passing.

The old man winked at his wife. "I'm telling her she can twist me around her finger, isn't that it?" he said, chuckling.

Mrs. Roche preceded her son and husband to the fireplace, introducing them to the Vandravartes with lively assumptions of little formalities observed, and the immense exuberance which good clothes, good feeding, good company, and complete absence of the susceptibilities could always lend her. "Now," she said snugly, "we shall be quite a happy little family."

Mrs. Vandravarte reached up a hand to Sir Anthony with—

"How do you do, Sir Anthony, and what brings *you* here?"

"My dear Mrs. Vandravarte," Amersham replied (out of his long repertoire of poses, he had selected that of the bored man of society), "the very question I was going to put to *you*. As to me, I have come here to avoid——"

The Vandravartes laughed delightedly. "The very thing we've come to do——"

He lifted his eyebrows: "The *very* thing?—my creditors—and—myself?"

"Sir Anthony," murmured Miss Birkett, "is simply *too* killing."

"I've come to avoid a degree," Fitzgerald added.

"That should be simple, Fitzy," said his sister.

"I think we've all come," said old Roche, with uneasy memories of Twist in him, "to—to avoid—something."

"There's one thing we *shan't* avoid," his wife remarked, beaming upon the circle, "and that's each other!"

"And another I don't intend to avoid, and that's Richenda," Fitzgerald observed with relish.

"Fitzy! Fitzy!" said his mother, trying to laugh. "Birkie!" she turned to the governess, "will you play us something, like an angel?"

The obedient Birkie rose at once. She might have spared herself the tremors she experienced, had she realised how Mrs. Roche congratulated herself upon her tact, in providing a background of subdued harmony as a setting to confidential murmurs, and the loosening of shy tongues, at the same time that she was getting rid of the odd person of the company.

Sir Anthony abhorred music, although he pretended to understand it. He retreated to the bay window, where Miss Vandravarte and Asphodel followed him. Mrs. Vandravarte, partially consoled by this fact for the society

in which she found herself, condescended to nod accompaniment to the running conversation of Mrs. Roche. Fitzgerald leaned against the mantelpiece, and enquired of his father into the condition of Roche's Tobacco Factory, one ear open to his mother's observations, and an eye upon his sister.

"Quite a *lady!*" he heard his mother confiding of Miss Birkett. "We make her almost one of the family. I'm keeping men out of her way, because she suits me very well—put me out if she was to get married."

Fitzy immediately crossed to the piano, and fixed an expression of dumb devotion upon Miss Birkett's agitated profile as she hissed out, between rests, "Don't turn, till I—tell you."

Mrs. Roche looked up suddenly, and saw that the fire was sinking lower and lower for lack of the attention which every one had been too much absorbed to administer to it. "Now that's too bad!" said Mrs. Roche; "our fire is going out on us. I love a blaze before I go to bed."

"Wait now!" said her husband. He seized a newspaper, and went down on his knees before the grate. She seized him by the tail of his coat.

"Where's your sense, Solly!—ring for a servant." She laid her hand upon the bell. "So ridiculous," she whispered to him, the Vandravartes being well out of reach; "looks as if you'd never got used to having them."

Richenda appeared in the doorway.

"Our fire's going out," Mrs. Roche called loudly to

her across the intervening space of floor. Richenda rustled quickly to the fire-place, and went down upon her knees.

"Oh, now," said old Roche, looking most uncomfortable, his eyes shooting quick glances round him, to see if he appeared absurd, "'tis too bad altogether to be troublin' you."

Richenda murmured reprovingly, "Oh no, sir."

"I don't like you to be roughening the little hands," Mr. Roche whispered. Richenda blushed swiftly, then, with a stealthy movement, she drew a pair of gloves from her pocket, put them on, and plunged her hands into the coal-scuttle. The movement, though cleverly effected, drew observation on her by its furtiveness.

"Look at her," said Asphodel to Sir Anthony, "she can't take hold of a couple of coals without gloves."

"Her first place was with a Duchess," whispered Mrs. Roche to Mrs. Vandravarte, "and I expect the Duchess was particular about her hands."

The fire responded to the persuasiveness of Richenda with little sounds of satisfaction. She rose, and with her hands beneath her apron, slipped out of the room.

"What on earth can you do with yourself all day, Sir Anthony, at this place?" Moira Vandravarte was saying to Amersham.

"It must have been horribly dull—till—till we came," added Asphodel, with her favourite weapon of audacity.

"Your remark, Miss Roche," he said, "requires no comment. To yours, Miss Vandravarte, I answer—for

sport, killing time; for study, retrenchment; spiritual exercises—trying to forget."

They looked at him sidewise, uncertain of his drift.

"What need have *you* to retrench?" enquired Miss Vandravarte, with a false sympathetic note which hid a real desire for the truth about his income.

"If my necessity were not retrenchment," he replied, "why should I feel the need of spiritual exercise? Necessity is the mother of Devotion. Invention was her second born."

"And what," said Asphodel more curiously, "have you to forget?"

"Ah, now," said Amersham, "that is less simple to explain. I have been dodging Fate round corners for some time past, but she has run me down at last in a blind alley, and stands before me with her hands behind her back, saying Left or Right. I'm here considering which hand I shall choose."

Birkie ceased, to the surprise of every one, for they had grown accustomed to her noise, but the conversation went on.

"Now some other little thing, Birkie, like an angel!" said Mrs. Roche.

Solomon Roche just gathered that Sir Anthony was speaking about hands, and whispered, "Choose a plump one, Sir Anthony, with a dimple; dimples mean sweet temper."

"You're very mysterious, Sir Anthony," said Moira, turning her curved lips down.

"We're all mysteries, Miss Vandravarte," he said, three-quarters of him in earnest. "All of our bare existences are based upon conditions; we hold our lives at a pin's fee. Some of us know it, and some don't. The happy ones are those that don't. And why, I want to know, why——"

"Why what?" said Fitzy, who had come up.

"Why are our innocent joys all based on the observance of some hideous and unmeaning formality? If we don't leave the ball-room where we've been quite good, when the clock strikes twelve—our snow-white palfreys are turned into rats."

"If we kiss the housemaid," Fitzy said, "our best girl hears of it."

"And if you don't kiss your best girl now and then, *you* hear of it, don't you?" said old Roche, unaware that he was caressing Asphodel's hair through the restrictions of her hair-net.

"Just like father!" she murmured, of the remark and the caress.

"If you're talking about conditions," Mrs. Roche said, bustling up, "you shan't leave this room to-night except on one of them."

"And what is that, Mrs. Roche?" he asked.

"That you give me a promise you won't leave the Imperial till you've come as my guest to a dance that Mrs. Vandravarte and I are talking of getting up. We'll just take possession of the hotel," she went on, her body vibrant with energy, "and we'll have down O'Flaherty's

band from town, and ask just a few *nice* people, and we'll enjoy ourselves."

"On condition, mind," said old Roche.

"That we don't mix our drinks," said Fitzy.

V

SIR Anthony rose at half-past six the next morning, in order to experience, as he put it to himself, the emotional experiment of breakfasting at seven. He came into the coffee-room, as the clock struck that hour, wearing a black velvet jacket tinged with memories in green, and carrying a half-finished picture, which he had been painting, underneath his arm. From the half-awakened and enquiring expression of the waiter with the corns, he gathered with relief that he was like to have the room to himself. Sir Anthony looked about him drearily, and yawned. As he ordered toast and fish, the waiter brought him a guide-book, and remarked—

"Leaving by an early train, sir? Like your bill?"

"Ah!—Oh, no," said Amersham. He propped his picture upright against a bowl of flowers, as business men their newspaper, and began to study it.

"Oh, beg pardon, sir. Fine day for fishing," said the waiter, hurrying away.

The expression of Sir Anthony, as he looked about him once again, was not exactly pleased. It changed, however, to slight satisfaction, as his tray appeared at the buttery-hatch, and the wisdom of his procedure in ordering break-

fast overnight, proved itself afresh to him. Having unloaded the tray, the waiter left the coffee-room. Sir Anthony had just gone into the world which he had painted in his picture, when he heard the rustling of crisp skirts—looked up and saw Richenda.

He narrowed his slanting olive-brown eyes, and looked at her through his glasses. She wore a linen dress which was the colour of dark blue Dutch delft. Her cap stood off from her face, reminding him of the caps of the girls of Brittany. Last night he thought her eyes were grey. This morning they were the colour of the Dutch delft gown. Her hair was of rich, piled bronze, and the tint of her wholesome flesh the flushed white shade of a Malmaison carnation.

But Amersham looked deeper than this. The girl was interesting to him, because of various contradictions in her aspect. There was a look of suppressed joy, he thought, in her strong elastic figure—a joy on which the conventions of her circumstances had laid a hand, which some refinement of self-valuation in herself had turned into composure. Yet there was a mournful dip, he fancied, in her mouth. He crooked an eager forefinger at her; he was certain that she was an emotional experience.

"Ah—Richenda!" Amersham said, and gave the name, to please himself, an Italian, staccato sound.

"Yes, sir." She fluttered to his side, her stiff skirts scraping against each other as she went, and looked down calmly on his long, dark hair, the Celtic mould of his lips and nose.

He pointed with a woman's finger at the toast.

"Richenda, what should you call this?"

She paused, then said: "I should call it a study in Black and White, sir."

Amersham looked up sharply. "Oh! Ah—you would, Richenda!" he said, then laughed. He pointed to the black print of the bar. "Or a line engraving?" he said.

He scanned her narrowly again.

"I'll change it, sir," she said, and rustled to the buttery-hatch, where she stood waiting for the tapping of the finger-nails.

Meantime Sir Anthony reflected deeply.

"Ah, Richenda!" he said, and pointed to his picture. "What do you say to that?"

The waitress looked down over his shoulder, and saw a group of purple trees beneath a peacock sky, and under the trees were well-nourished and nude figures, with heavy emerald and turquoise wings, standing knee-deep in grass. "Oh, I say!" Richenda said, and the mournful lips parted for a chuckle. "I *do* like them. What are they, sir?"

She pointed with a finger; he took occasion to observe her hands, of which the night before there had been so much mention. He saw that her nails were like the outer petals of pink apple-blossom.

"Figures." Sir Anthony answered with a listless note.

She drew her breath. "Oh, I say, and where do you see them, sir?"

He looked up, waving his hand. "Here—anywhere; at night," he said.

"Yes, sir. After supper—or before?" she asked.

Amersham looked up quickly. But Richenda's eyes were fixed trustingly on the picture. "During supper, sometimes," he answered.

"Yes, sir," she said obediently. "Does it hurt?"

Sir Anthony wanted to laugh. Inwardly and artistically he was delighted. Outwardly and aristocratically he was not pleased. After a pompous pause, he said, more coldly—

"Well, have you anything to say about it?"

"Only——" she began with eagerness. "I *do* want to know, sir——"

"What?"

"What makes 'em stick their feet in that long grass?"

He coughed a little, and stirred.

"I cannot say; it is the way they reveal themselves to me. I am not certain that they *have* feet."

"Oh, I say—poor things!" She paused. "Well, if you don't mind me sayin'—I should take their legs out of that grass—that's if you're goin' to sell it."

"But—but why?" he said irritably.

"People do say," said Richenda, "some artists can't draw feet."

Amersham reddened, and coughed, as the girl moved quickly away. He sighed, rose, and pulled down his waistcoat.

"Richenda!" he began, lingering a little awkwardly.

"It was very good of you to provide refreshment for us with the name Richenda. It reminds me"—he looked at her experimentally, under long quizzing eyelashes—"of watercress in a cool amber stream!"

He believed that there were revelations in Richenda. With vehement, artistic curiosity, he desired her to reveal them, and immediately.

"Euphonious, pellucid," he continued.

"——Crystalline?" she said in a low murmuring voice.

He started. "Richenda! you have read Edgar Allan Poe. You have read Rossetti——"

"Amersham, isn't it?" she said eagerly. "But there! I've a trick of mixin' 'em up."

Sir Anthony almost jumped. "Richenda," he said, coming close and peering at her, "you have read the poet?"

"No, sir. Nothing to matter," she said, with a sigh, and dropped her eyes.

"Richenda, Imperial Richenda," he began pressingly, "who gave you this name?"

Richenda paused a second, then looked at Sir Anthony, with unflinching purpose in her gaze, between the eyes.

"The usual persons, I believe, sir," she replied.

He coughed, and changed his feet at this rebuff. "Ah, yes! Ah, yes! Very likely! So they would," he said. He assumed his favourite scholar's pose of the bent shoulders, the sightless eyes, searching the pattern of the carpet, and shuffled out of the room. As he turned towards the stairs

he ran into Mrs. Vandravarte and her daughter, coming down them.

Amersham disliked Mrs. Vandravarte, chiefly because she reminded him of a mule which he had ridden as a boy, and that had frequently kicked him off its back. She had a long face, long teeth, long ears, and a vicious backward look, he thought, in the whites of her eyes.

"Ah, Sir Anthony, you don't mean to tell me you breakfast so early!" she exclaimed. "We are just going to have ours."

"So soon?" he said.

"So you can, either, have another, or sit by and watch us eating ours," continued Mrs. Vandravarte, turning him back into the coffee-room.

"Where were you off to, Sir Anthony?" asked Moira.

"To write a business letter to my Godmother," he said.

"What an *extr'ordin'ry* combination," said her mother in deep, drawling, disagreeable tones, "of business, with a Godmother!"

"I call it business because it is not pleasure," he began.

"And what claim can your Godmother have on you now?" Moira said, seating herself at the table. "Aren't you confirmed yet?"

"In the fact of my confirmation—in the legal sense—her claim lies," he answered. "She is an unpleasant person, addicted to a quantity of dogs, and false fringes. I happen to be another of Lady Dunemer's addictions."

"Lady Dunemer!—is she your Godmother—delightful creature?" Mrs. Vandravarte interrupted.

He nodded his head and went on. "So much of an addiction—that she is going to leave me what she may not take hence with her—on condition that I report myself once a week to her, and provided that I——" He stopped and ran his fingers through his hair.

"That you are a good boy?" said Moira. She looked at him alluringly out of the corners of her long brown eyes.

"That I conform to her ideas of being a good boy," he said. "It corresponds exactly to my conception of the irrevocably damned."

As he spoke, Richenda laid ham and eggs upon the table. Again he glanced at the apple-blossom nails. He sighed heavily. "Conditions—conditions!" he said. "The affection of all those people with whom I have affinity in this life seems to be based upon one fundamental and peculiar condition. If it is I who care, I continue only to do so on condition that they don't rob me of that noble sense of lavishing one's all without return. If it is they who care for me, they do it because they recognise at once that I can give them nothing back.

"It is not because of their own essential qualities that we hate some people at first sight, and love others. It is because the people that we meet are mirrors to reflect ourselves, convex, concave, and mirrors set at different angles. We prefer those that conceal from us the fact that we are getting old. We avoid those that make us monsters to

ourselves, and other people laugh. I hate people who thrust their all on me without my leave: they show me to myself in such a horrid light."

"On that principle," said Mrs. Vandravarte, turning down her lips, "I shouldn't say you loved the Roches—for they seem to be fairly bent on bestowing all their time and attention on you."

"How did you get to know them?" Moira said. "You know, people have only just begun to call on them. Once nobody——"

Sir Anthony glanced up and made a face in the direction of Richenda.

"Oh, she can't hear. They hear nothing," said the mother.

"Don't be too sure," said Moira.

"The most *extr'ordin'ry* persons!" said Mrs. Vandravarte. "And such terribly bad form; that's the worst of a place like this: it forces you into contact with such—people!"

He drew his brows together. "She's in their service, you know."

"Whose?"

"The Roches'."

"What! d'you mean to say——"

"Didn't you know," he said in a low voice, "that this is Roche's Imperial Hotel?"

"Ah, nonsense!" the Vandravartes said together, and fell back in their chairs.

"Good heavens! and we were saying to them, we never set foot in such a hole in our lives," said Moira.

"What hypocrisy! to pretend she'd nothing to do with it," said her mother.

"What shall we do now?" said Miss Vandravarte, appealing to Sir Anthony.

"Praise the Twist!" he said.

"Praise the what?"

"Roche's Twist Tobacco."

The Vandravartes shrieked with laughter.

"So that's where they get their money!" said Moira.

"*Have* they money?" said Mrs. Vandravarte directly to Sir Anthony.

"Oh, heaps!"

"Still, one must be civil to people," began Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Mother, I'm certain the girl has heard, from her face," said Moira. "She'll go and tell——"

Her mother turned full round, and stared deliberately at Richenda.

"Extremely awkward, especially as all the entertainment we shall get at this place is likely to come from them. Give her something, if you think she has. They daren't do anything but hold their tongues. Moira, you must be civil to Mrs. Twist," she giggled. "They have a motor, and if you want to go into town it might be convenient——"

"What shall we do," inquired her daughter, "when our friends come to see us? We can't introduce the *Roches* to them."

"My dear Moira," said her mother, rising from her

breakfast, "the longer you live the more you'll understand that there are some people one *must* consider in this world, in common justice to one's self."

Sir Anthony made a movement of escape.

"What do you do with yourself all day, Sir Anthony?" said Moira, looking after him. "I hear you've always some study or other on hand. Which of them is it now?"

"I—ah, paint a bit, and, while I'm here, I'm studying conchology," he answered her. "It is extremely fascinating——"

"Oh, really," Moira murmured, glancing at her mother.

"That may be all very well for *men* amongst themselves," said Mrs. Vandravarte, after a deliberate pause, and looking fixedly at Amersham. "Personally I am not acquainted with that science. It does not strike me, however, Sir Anthony, as being *quite* the kind of study to discuss with a young girl."

Sir Anthony listened reverently, and then answered in a low voice, while he looked upon the carpet with a sphinx-like countenance, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. Vandravarte, but really, nowadays, people think so little of that kind of thing. However,"—he bowed—"you may rely upon my honour, dear Mrs. Vandravarte."

"Dear Sir Anthony!" she replied, with an imperial wave of the hand, her nearest approach to real feeling in her voice, "we will say no more. Surely, between *us*, it is hardly necessary."

She bowed as she left the coffee-room; he bowed again to her, with a glance from his fantastic eyes. Mrs. Vandravarte swept towards the drawing-room, to discuss the day's proceedings—Sir Anthony to the smoke-room, to write his weekly letter to his Godmother.

VI

IN answer to a message from a servant that Mrs. Roche wished to speak to Richenda, the waitress tapped at her door. Miss Roche was with her mother, and the costume of the two ladies was much the same as that in which, the night before, Richenda had surprised them. Asphodel held a bunch of false curls in her hand, which matched her own hair exactly, and when Richenda came into the room, she was telling Mrs. Roche to pin them low down, and in the very middle.

"Oh, Richenda," said Mrs. Roche, "I wanted to speak to you last night, but I hadn't the opportunity. Before the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte comes down, I want to warn you——"

"Mrs. Vandravarte has had her breakfast, madam," said Richenda quietly, "with Sir Anthony Amersham."

"What, *already!*" cried Mrs. Roche.

Asphodel addressed her mother's reflection in the glass: "Always the same story," she said, after a pregnant pause "You'd want to be a lot smarter, mother!"

Mrs. Roche addressed Richenda, with a rising colour. "There are *some* people in this world," she said, "who

can't see some people with something but they always want to get something from them——"

"Certainly, madam," replied Richenda.

"If the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte should ever speak to you, Richenda——" she broke off. "Come, tell me the truth, my girl, *has* she spoken to you?"

On the girl's face, as she answered Mrs. Roche, was an assured combination of guarded caution with unmistakable straightforwardness. "Of what, madam?" she said firmly.

"If ever you were thinking of leaving your place—about coming to her, if you wanted a good situation?"

"No, madam," said the girl, "most certainly not, so far!"

"Oh, then, that's all right," said Mrs. Roche, a little bit embarrassed. "And now mind, my girl—I'm warning you—if she *should* talk that way to you, in the future, don't you be such a fool as to be listening to her." She pinned and patted in her daughter's curls, with movements that suggested that the source of her anger lay with them. "Some people are so fond of meddling," she continued, "they must always be interfering with other people's business. If you've half the sense I credit you with, Richenda, you'll know a good place when you've got it. People say Mrs. Vandravarte is always changing. It's a bad sign in a mistress, when the servants won't stop. They say"—she dropped her voice—"she's a frightful temper, and starves her maids besides——"

Mrs. Roche broke off, biting her lips, and flushing.

"Now I wouldn't wonder," she said to herself, "but what that girl goes and repeats every word I said to Mrs. Vandravarte!"

What if, by one slip of her energetic tongue, she had thrown down a bomb which would destroy the procession of events towards which, for years, her whole heart had been bent! Supposing that inducements to leave the Imperial Hotel *had* been already extended to Richenda! Suppose Richenda was a liar! Mrs. Roche turned round, and smiled at her with immense graciousness.

"Don't get dissatisfied with the Imperial, my girl," she said. "The Imperial's quite satisfied with you."

"I am only too anxious to please, madam," said Richenda, looking down.

"That's the girl!" Mrs. Roche exclaimed heartily.

She hastened downstairs to the drawing-room, where she had heard that Mrs. Vandravarte and her daughter were—only to look at them, as a child whom the whole night has separated from the reality of his new toy, hastens, on waking, to reassure himself that it is there. Asphodel finished dressing, and the glass reflected a forehead scored with plans.

As she left her room, Asphodel observed Richenda rustling crisply down the passage, the poise of her whole figure radiant with self-reliance. She flattened herself respectfully against the wall to let Miss Roche pass by. Richenda fascinated Asphodel. In her presence she experienced the attraction of admiration mixed with indecisiveness, which is the effect inherent strength of

personality produces upon weak personality artificially supported. They looked at each other steadily.

"Your mother is having breakfast, madam," said Richenda guilelessly. "Sir Anthony," she added, "is in the smoke-room."

Asphodel flushed with a swift appreciation of Richenda. "Oh, really?" she said lightly. "I've got a silk petticoat in my box that I put my heel through; remind me, and I'll give it you, Richenda."

"Oh, *thank* you, madam," said the girl.

"I was admiring your nails, Richenda—they're not half bad. Servants generally have them black. How do you keep them so nice?"

She fancied that the girl grew red.

"I suppose I've got into the habit, madam—her Grace bein' so particular. Her Grace's own nails were like little rosebuds."

"You must show me how to make mine like the Duchess's," remarked Miss Roche.

The waitress smiled all over her face. "I'll *try*, madam," she said.

As Asphodel went down the staircase, she was saying to herself, "Richenda is a treasure. She knows the way the wind blows. I'll make it up to her. It will be worth my while to keep in with Richenda. Richenda is my 'find.'"

In the meantime Mrs. Roche had pursued Mrs. Vandravarte to the drawing-room.

"Good *morning*, Mrs. Vandravarte!" she exclaimed.

"Richenda"—she under-scored the word—"has just told me how early you breakfasted." At mention of Richenda, the uneasy recollections of both ladies caused them to fix each other with unwavering eyes, from which encounter they returned assured by the expression of tense civility upon each other's face.

"We breakfasted with Sir Anthony! *Charming* man!" said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Roche, "such a pity people are saying he'll have to marry money!"

Miss Vandravarte turned down her lips; her mother was doing the same.

"What will not people say," said Moira, "who have not the opportunity of being acquainted with people!"

"They say, too," added Mrs. Roche, not in the least discouraged, and giving way to a lenient laugh, "that Sir Anthony's rather naughty, and that's why——"

"It is far best," said Mrs. Vandravarte, in quelling and enormous tones, "not to give ear to the small talk of envious persons." She changed the subject with deliberate purpose to make it plain that the mere mention of Sir Anthony by Mrs. Roche was sullying to him, and to them implied a dissociation from him which must instantly be corrected. "We had *quite* a nice breakfast this morning," she continued. "We were too much fatigued to look about us when we came last night. Extr'ordin'ry how different things look after a good night's rest! We're charmed with this little place: so quiet: so old-fashioned!"

"Ah, it's not too bad," lightly returned Mrs. Roche,

"if you get to know the right kind of people!" She dropped her voice. "So often, in little country hotels, you're forced to mix with people," she paused, and pursed her lips, "that you wouldn't be mixing with at home."

"I quite agree," said Mrs. Vandravarte in her deepest notes.

"I am queer that way," said Mrs. Roche, half-whispering. "I can put up with anything, provided it's refined. I don't mind downright poverty—people can't help being poor—so long as it's well-bred. But vulgarity crushes me, some way." She turned and whispered to Mrs. Vandravarte. "Your daughter!—so distangy! Such an air. Redeems the plainest girl! But," she added quickly, "with daintiness *and* aristocratic features——" She spread out her hands.

"I have been admiring your daughter's hair; does she do it over a frame?" Mrs. Vandravarte returned by way of answer.

"It's perfectly simple. Asphodel would be charmed to show Miss Vandravarte."

"Oh thanks," said Mrs. Vandravarte quickly, and with decision, "we think the way she has it suits her very well."

"She wears no net, I think," said Mrs. Roche.

"We think it," answered Mrs. Vandravarte, on whom the "we" sounded like the Imperial personal pronoun, "so far less stiff-looking—with one drawback," she continued boldly: "if one is motoring or—or anything like that, it is so apt to blow about."

"Speaking of motors," said Mrs. Roche, her eyes flashing with constructiveness, and willingly availing herself of this broad hint, "reminds me, we have one here—the others are being done up. Any time—any time at all, you or Miss Vandravarte wanted to go into town——"

"Oh, I never thought——" Mrs. Vandravarte began.

"Fitzjur'ld can drive you in," concluded Mrs. Roche.

"Extremely kind, I'm sure," Mrs. Vandravarte replied. "It never occurred to me"—she became a little involved—"that you'd have your—that there would be a garage here——"

"Fitzjur'ld is fetching out some things from town for me this morning," said his mother, looking at Miss Vandravarte. "Fitzjur'ld——"

She entered into a biographical description of her son: how he had been at Harrow, and proceeded thence to Oxford. Of the various scholarships he might have taken, had Fitzgerald chosen. In spite of the latent possibilities of genius, of the simplicity of his tastes. He had learned to drive a motor in five minutes, and though they had a chauffeur with them, vastly preferred to drive himself. Of a race that he had run with Lord Mountjoyce's son, who was the same age as Fitzgerald, and, indeed, had been up to Oxford in the same year. Of Fitzgerald's popularity with students and with masters. . . .

In the meantime Moira Vandravarte had conveyed to her mother, through the absorption of Mrs. Roche, by means of a system of signalling with her expressive eyebrows, the

fact that there were certain things which she must fetch from their town house in Dublin.

Mrs. Vandravarte interrupted Mrs. Roche to say, had she inferred correctly that "Mr. Roche was going into town in *any* case, because her daughter——"

When Miss Vandravarte had retired upstairs to put on her motor coat and hat, the gratitude of Mrs. Roche to those powers which had endowed her with her constructive genius, overflowed in a sudden handling and praising of the old lace that Mrs. Vandravarte wore. She had something like it at home, but not quite so good. Mrs. Vandravarte condescended to lift a locket set in pearls which depended on Mrs. Roche's bosom, and to enquire if it was French. Mrs. Roche wanted to know where Mrs. Vandravarte had her clothes made: Mrs. Vandravarte procured the name of Mrs. Roche's dressmaker.

When they had seen Fitzgerald Roche drive off, with Moira, sitting beside him on the Panhard car, Mrs. Roche drew her chair still closer to Mrs. Vandravarte. She confided to her how she pitied them for coming to such dull quarters as the Imperial Hotel. She mentioned various notions for enlivening their stay, which had occurred to her. In a fortnight's time the Hunt Ball was to take place. They could make up a party, and motor into town together. Before that, there would be their own dance. That, Mrs. Roche was quite determined, should be most exclusive. "Mixed dances," she said in her mysterious voice, "were so unpleasant. One gave such offence by refusing to dance with certain people—Mrs.

Vandravarte would know the kind she meant. But people were so impertinent."

Her glib assurance, the torrent of her hushed talk, the nodding head, descriptive hands, allied to the subtle flattery implied by all she said, began to have a certain hypnotic influence on Mrs. Vandravarte. She kept her dull eyes fixed on Mrs. Roche. She was half-fascinated by her impertinent assumption of equality, so undauntedly kept up; she was seduced by the sustained suggestion of wealth. Her nostrils distended as she listened; she seemed to smell, to taste, to see, to handle gold.

Mrs. Vandravarte roused herself at the flagging of the mesmeric tongue, to wonder where Miss Roche might be.

"I wonder now!" said Mrs. Roche, and a guilty look came into her face.

VII

SIR ANTHONY had taken up a sheet of notepaper stamped with the Imperial address. Beneath the address was an imaginative illustration representing the hotel as a block of buildings, continued round many corners, and trailing off into remote obscurity. The entire traffic of the village seemed to have gathered round its doors. Side-cars were making for the entrance, and finding it blocked by victorias and four-in-hands, and groups of people on the path were in the act of coming out of, going into, or walking rapidly towards it.

"My dear Godmother," Sir Anthony began, "you have but to cast your eye upon the note-paper heading, to conjure up a picture of where, for the past week, I have taken up my quarters. I do not intend to remain——"

At this point Amersham rose, balled the paper in his fist, and threw it into the waste-paper basket which blocked the entrance to his knees beneath the writing-table. He rose, and went to the window of the smoke-room which gave upon the front aspect of the Imperial, drawn thither by blood-curdling shouts, hoarse whoops, and frenzied yells. The space before the Imperial Hotel was occupied by a seething mass of urchins, both booted and barefooted,

hatless and bonnetted, in deadly earnest over a national sport which seemed an interesting combination of hockey with Rugby and Association football. You played it, Amersham observed, with a stuffed stocking foot, tied up with string. This was the primary essential of the game. When tossed to a great distance, this ball might be met either, by a couple of wooden clubs, which clashed in emulation and hurled it out of sight; it might fall among those who seemed under the necessity of only giving it a bare-toe encounter, or be met with clasped arms and carried, running, to a distance.

"Not quite the kind of scene," Amersham murmured to himself, as he returned to the writing-table, "which the Imperial note-paper design would lead one to suppose."

He took another sheet, and began once more:—

"Dear Godmother,

"I am pursued on every side by people whom I wish to avoid, and leaving here to——"

It was extremely irritating, how difficult a business letter was to write, to those whose business was to have none. Sir Anthony began to draw patterns on the note-paper. The machinery of his brain seemed clogged with something. Vaguely he felt, it often was; usually with petticoats. Some of them rustled past the shut door of the smoke-room now, and they were crisp.

He began to think about Richenda. Amersham was fond of discoveries. He had discovered a young poet who believed that to be great was to be dissipated, and was

conscientiously living the life of Paul Verlaine as a Preface to the poetry he was to write. Only he got no further than the Preface.

He had discovered a little shop in Dublin where they made the only buns. The worst of that had been, that the virtue of the buns seemed born of their seclusion. Once dragged from privacy into publicity, they lost the virtue which had been their charm. It was such a pity, thought Sir Anthony, that to discover, meant to uncover, and to take off the cover, that your dish was cold.

Now he had "found" Richenda. He would not make the same mistake with her which he had made with the buns, and the under-study of Verlaine. He would keep Richenda undiscovered by anybody but himself. The enthusiasms of Sir Anthony had always spent themselves in participation. But he was wiser now.

"My dear Godmother," he wrote at this point. "You may see from the above address where I am, and intend staying for some little time. It is so charmingly secluded——"

His thoughts drifted to Richenda again. How had a girl who could compose so lilting and harmonious a line as "Euphon-ious, pell-uc-id, crys-tall-ine!" come as a servant to the Imperial Hotel? He wondered if by any chance she were some well-bred woman, fallen from her estate, and forced to earn her bare bread as she might. Again, if she were peasant-born, but belonging to the aristocracy of souls. At least, Richenda was unusual. Richenda was mysterious. He intended to watch and draw out

Richenda. At that moment Asphodel, who had finished a hasty breakfast, opened the door, and looked in.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I thought my *father* was here!"

"I am extremely sorry to say that he is not," returned Amersham.

"Oh!" said Asphodel in reply, "then I suppose I'd better——"

"Stay," said Sir Anthony with desperate sweetness, "please stay!"

"Shall I?" she said, putting her head on one side.

For answer, he placed a chair beneath her, and handed her his case of cigarettes.

Swiftly she settled on her best card of audacity. "I declare, it's a treat to see a cigarette that isn't marked with Roche!" she exclaimed. She looked at him sidewise, under her lashes, laughing. "To think that my name is picked up off the street, and in the mouth of every little corner-boy!"

"But that is true fame, Miss Roche," he said, "to have your name on everybody's lips. And you must think a little of the corner-boys," he said in gentle tones, "of the fragrance which it brings into their dull lives."

"And then to be thrown away, a fag-end in the gutter," Asphodel continued.

"True fragrance," said Sir Anthony subtly, "is never thrown away. And lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

"Well, I know of no weed that smells worse than ours," she said. Sir Anthony laughed conformably. "Oh, it's all very well for you, with your blue blood, to laugh," Asphodel went on, "but you don't know the tragedy it might be to be a person to be labelled with their father's tobacco. It's a cloud on my life, I declare."

"But still a fragrant cloud," he said, "you must allow. If you were one of the Hiawatha ladies, you'd have been called Golden-Cloud."

He paused, but she did not understand. To hide this fact, she continued:—

"It's Roche's Cut, Bar, Quid, Plug, Roll, Coil, Medium, or Shag, wherever I set my foot. I could put up with that, but when it gets to providing puns for servants——" She sat up excitedly, and began to gesticulate with her small ringed hands. "My father gave a sovereign to a waiter. The minute he turned his back—'Roche's Quid' I heard him say to another."

Sir Anthony laughed heartily, and began to look amused.

"Another time," she continued, "my father sprained his foot very badly, and had to send for the doctor. It was as black as your hat, and like a puff-ball to look at. 'Is it Potts' Fracture?' my father said to the doctor. 'No, it's Roche's Twist,' he said. I never forgave him for that—and I never will."

"Why should you look at it that way? When you are married to some Duke," said Sir Anthony, "people will say, here's a pretty Coil!"

"You're making fun of me," she said, blushing.

"And when you drive in the street, far too important to remember poor devils like me, and just don't see me, I shall call it Roche's Cut.'"

Asphodel was blushing, and pouting, half-flattered, half-uncertain how she should receive these observations.

"Oh, I shall never marry a duke," she said, looking provocatively at him.

"Now, what makes you say that?" he replied reproachfully.

She wagged her head. "The Bar between," said Asphodel.

They burst out laughing together: Amersham lit a fresh cigarette, and realised that he was enjoying himself.

"Sir Anthony," said Asphodel. "People say you're rather a naughty man. *Are* you naughty?"

He was standing with his back against the wall, where the electric bell was placed. He was charmed, and started slightly. The bell rang.

"Er—only rather," he said. He took peculiar pleasure in the rôle she thrust upon him, it opened up alluring alleys, beckoning him he knew not whither. "'The bell invites me,'" he said under his breath. His eyes sparkled: in all the characters which he assumed, he took the child's delight of make-believe; they carried him beyond himself, they revealed him to himself in fascinating colours. In this way it was scarcely possible to weary ever of Sir Anthony.

"Aren't you *ever* good?" she said.

"Only under great provocation," Amersham replied.

"I think I like them naughty," Asphodel murmured.

"Then, if your type is common, how can you wonder that virtue is more prevalent with women than——"

He broke off short. The door opened, and Richenda stood before them. She said nothing. Asphodel was struck dumb. Sir Anthony stared. There was a pause.

"Did you ring, sir?" she said.

"Ah, yes, the bell rang," he answered, scratching his chin. "A—a—whisky and soda, please."

"Small or large, sir?"

"Large!" answered Amersham firmly.

Richenda disappeared. He drew a tremendous breath.

"So inconvenient," said Sir Anthony abstractedly. "I never do drink whisky in the morning."

VIII

THE same evening Fitzgerald Roche was standing before the open entrance of the Imperial Hotel, waiting for the dinner-gong which should unite, as Fitzy put it to his father, the "Three Castles" of Vandravarte, Roche, and Amersham, in one "Bond of Union." Fitzgerald was not sentimental, but he could not help perceiving with enjoyment, and the nearest step to sentiment of which his character was capable, the sweet exuberance of the salt air, bringing a sense of buoyancy and life, of health and hope, to him. The sky was floating out the scarlet pennons of its clouds in honour of the sun's home-coming; a few faint notes of satisfaction came from unseen birds. The scent of approaching dinner was reconciling Fitzgerald to all things, when he heard the door of the manager's office, distanced a few yards from him, open quietly, and a low voice say—

"I hold you to your promise, Mr. Roche."

Fitzgerald thought the voice must be addressing him. He turned, and saw the end of a woman's black dress disappearing inside the coffee-room, which stood exactly opposite the office of the manager. Fitzgerald knew the voice: he was certain that it was Richenda's. He waited

a minute, and then the door of the office opened, and the face of old Roche looked out. It was uneasy, flushed. On seeing his son, Solomon Roche came out, and seemed uncertain whether to join him, to turn and go upstairs, or to escape into the coffee-room.

Fitzgerald folded his arms. "Warm night, Governor!" he said, steadily fixing the old man with his eyes.

Old Roche took off the high-crowned bowler-hat, and wiped his forehead, which glistened.

"Would you say so, Fitzjur'ld?" he answered. "I wouldn't mind what kind of a night it was!"

"Some nights are that way, Governor," said Fitzgerald, "one minute you'd feel hot, and the next cold, till you wouldn't know was it the night or yourself that was ailing. I've known 'em like that myself."

"Changeable, I s'pose," said the old man absently.

"Ay, Governor," answered Fitzy, "kind of female nights, I'd call 'em. Was that the waitress, Richenda, crossing the hall just now?"

"Maybe," replied his father; "one o' the servant girls. I wouldn't know one from the other, Fitzjur'ld."

"Then you'd best put a mark on this one," said Fitzgerald.

"Why so, Fitzjur'ld?" said the old man quickly.

"You've promised her something, Governor. It might go to the wrong address."

The old man tripped over a mat, and his words at the same time. "Oh, 'tis only that she's faddy in herself—being used to high society, I s'pose," he said. "But

she's trying to come around me to let her take her meals by herself—you needn't be mentionin' it now to your mother—she'd think 'twas soft I was."

He went across into the coffee-room, and shut the door behind him. Fitzgerald fancied he heard whispering, mingled with the clank of plates, as Richenda put the last touches to the tables.

"Oh ho!" remarked Fitzgerald to himself, "so *that's* the way of the wind!"

A few minutes later the gong rang. Fitzgerald entered the coffee-room, and fixed his eyes upon Richenda, standing opposite the buttery-hatch. She did not look up, but she felt his eyes. Richenda blushed.

"H'm!" said Fitzgerald to himself. And he determined to set a watch over Richenda.

From afar, descending feet and voices could be heard, and Mr. Roche re-entered the coffee-room in company with Mrs. Vandravarte, the brilliance of her diamonds accentuating the dullness of her eyes. Behind him came Fitzgerald's mother, marvellously dressed, vibrant with enthusiasm, talking and gesticulating to Sir Anthony. Moira Vandravarte and Asphodel followed, affecting an interest in each other's characters which would enable them to turn vivaciously as they walked, and gather glimpses of one another's gowns. Last came Birkie, glittering in sequins, and in eyes, leading the enquiring Fluke by one hand. Solomon Roche looked quickly at his son; then Fitzgerald saw him glance a moment at Richenda. Richenda's eyes, which changed as often

as the sea they looked upon, were fixed upon the horse-shoe of the bay, that could be seen through the French window. At a little distance from her stood the waiter with the corns, his napkin dangling by one hand from his hip, his invariably crooked leg supported by the other, fixing a sulky stare of mistrustful admiration upon the waitress.

An air of complacent success was diffused amongst the party, as they seated themselves at the long table in the middle of the room. In the person of Asphodel Roche it had, perhaps, gathered chiefly to a head. It was noticeable that the eyes of everyone were inclined to focus themselves most on her. Self-triumph is the secret of all proselytism. Asphodel had chosen out by instinct her most becoming gown. Her grey eyes were shrouded in soft mist. She had her mother's habit of physical vibration when she was triumphant. She smiled at everyone, and, self-conscious in the memory of their *tête-à-tête* and its dramatic interruption, most at Sir Anthony. It would have been impossible for Amersham not to smile back at her. Besides, she looked so pretty. Mrs. Roche, who could not take her eyes from Asphodel, intercepted the passage of many smiles. Her approval of her daughter was immense. While she had dressed her hair for dinner, Asphodel had given her mother to understand that some things in this world were better comprehended than expressed. Asphodel was now living up to Mrs. Roche's hopes, even more than she had thought it possible. Some people's daughters were so disappointing:

they looked their best for other women, and insisted on an unusual plainness when they should have done their mothers most credit.

Miss Birkett gazed at Asphodel with fascination; the sentence of "my former pupil, Lady Asphodel Amersham,' was already graven on the testimonials of her imagination.

Moira Vandravarte—one of those young women who have not spent five minutes with every man they meet, before they class him in their minds as "taken" by themselves, or if not so, then "not quite my sort"—had come to the conclusion that the close proximity of the motor-car must have reduced Fitzgerald to the "taken" class. She fancied him a foil to set against Sir Anthony. Mrs. Vandravarte perceived her daughter's card; but had not perceived a flaw in Mrs. Roche's statement that Asphodel rose late, to account for her detention in the smoke-room with Sir Anthony. It was also most convenient to have the Roches' motor, in which to do her shopping in the town.

The whole time of the Fluke was taken up in fixing the cold eyes of analysis of the modern child upon each member of the party. She hated Mrs. Vandravarte, because she was ugly. She loved her sister, because she was wearing a new dress. She disliked Miss Vandravarte, because she was patronising. She could not take her eyes off Amersham, because his hair was rather long.

As they sat down to table, Sir Anthony, who had not seen the child before, turned to her with a fascinating

smile, to cover his dislike of children, and asked her what her name might be.

"She's called the Fluke," said Asphodel.

"Why are you called the Fluke, little lady?" enquired Sir Anthony. The child raised her voice.

"Because I insisted on coming when I wasn't wanted," she recited, and retired into her soup-plate amidst the universal applause which experience had taught her to reckon on.

"I'm shocked, Margaret, I'm shocked," said Birkie, shrieking with laughter. Sir Anthony thought that it was time for her not to be, for he could see that she had heard it many times before.

Mrs. Vandravarte had determined to be shocked, when she saw Sir Anthony laughing, and changed her mind.

"Surely a very unsuitable name, little lady," said Sir Anthony to her, "for use to-night."

In spite of the endearing "little lady" phrase, the Fluke gathered that, if he dared, Sir Anthony would have called her what he thought her, which was something less polite. She looked at him implacably, and gave Amersham to understand that he was not at all funny. Old Roche waited till the laughter had gone down. Then he began—

"Did you ever hear the story——"

Asphodel answered: "I'm sure we have, father, if it's one of yours."

"Well, maybe you have," said old Roche; "but maybe Sir Anthony hasn't."

Asphodel continued to Sir Anthony: "That's the worst of all the fathers I ever came across: they've only one or two stories. I've come to the conclusion that they welcome visitors simply because they're someone fresh, to tell the same old story to."

"Old stories," said old Roche, chuckling, "are like old friends—you can always count on 'em!"

"In the old times people measured the capacities of their friends as one or two bottle men. But I measure all mine as two or three story men," Fitzgerald remarked.

Amersham said across the table to Fitzgerald, "That's quite true; but women are even worse in that respect than men. That's why, so far, I have not married. One can put up with the two-storied friend, but Heaven defend us from the two-storied wife! All women, and the Irish, imagine that they gain their point by repetition —the repetition of a grievance. They both forget that grievances, like stories, lose point by being repeated. But the two-story wife delivers herself of these twin accomplishments, for the sole benefit of her husband, with precisely the same crow of triumph every time. Like a hen, who forgets that, to impartial outsiders, an egg looks always like an egg.

"But that's the worst of wives: they do not gain by repetition. Your frugal-minded man marries an actress, because he knows the actress puts a different 'antic disposition' on with every hat. And so he gets combined in her the variety of polygamy with the economy of monogamy."

Fitzgerald looked up suddenly at Richenda; she was standing between Sir Anthony and Mr. Roche. Her eyes were bright with intelligence. The girl was listening to every word.

"Well, will I tell you the story?" said old Roche.

At this point the waitress put down the liver-wing of the roast fowl before him; Fitzgerald noticed that she had given a drum-stick to his mother.

"Go ahead, Governor!" said Fitzgerald.

The old man waited till there was silence, then emerged above the buffeting waves of his family, to breathe the untrammelled air of his visitors' attention.

"A friend o' mine," said old Roche, breaking silence, "had one fair daughter—like Jephtha, wasn't it? And when she was goin' to 'come out,' as they call it, she persuaded him to give a big ball. The whole country-side got invited, and there was great talk upstairs an' down, ye may bet, in the servants' hall as well as in the boo-dwar. And Billy Hogan, that was got in to clean the boots an' knives, heard great talk among the other servants of the big comin'-out ball. 'What's a comin'-out ball?' says Billy. 'Ah, yeh!—go 'way, he don't know what's this a comin'-out ball is,' they said to him. 'The ladies turns down their chemises, ye know, an' has low neck, an' all, an' the gentlemen has big, long-tailed coats.' An' that was all poor Billy could get out of 'em—what was the meanin' o' the comin'-out ball. Well, the night o' the ball, Miss Norah,—that's the name o' the young lady in whose honour 'twas to be given,—

she asks all the servants up to the hall, to be lookin' at her in her first evenin' dress. An' they were all sighin' an' groanin', an' sayin' she was a dream o' beauty: only Billy Hogan, in the background, never let a word at all.

"'An' what do *you* say to the dress, Billy?' says Miss Norah, wantin' the approval of every man-jack of 'em, I s'pose.

"'Oh, begorrah, Miss Norah,' says Billy, 'they were all tellin' me 'twas a comin'-out ball, but, be the saints,' says Billy, 'I'd no notion ye'd come out that far.'"

"Such a horrid vulgar story, I think," said Mrs. Roche to Amersham, when she could make herself heard.

"*Extr'ordin'ry!*" exclaimed Mrs. Vandravarte, with a frown, and while Mrs. Roche, with her face averted, continued speaking to Sir Anthony, she propped her lorgnette on her nose, and boldly snatched an opportunity to scan the embroidery on Mrs. Roche's dress.

"For all he looks so innocent," said Mrs. Roche to Amersham, "you've no idea the stories he can tell! Men are horrid. I hate a whited elephant. Shows such hypocrisy!"

"'Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides. Who covers faults, shame them derides,'" Asphodel chanted unexpectedly in Sir Anthony's other ear.

Her mother was arrested. Everybody looked at Asphodel.

"Now where does that come from?" said Mrs. Roche.

"It just came into my head," said Asphodel.

"I seem to know it," remarked Mrs. Vandravarte, with her tones turned full on the embroidery.

"Shakespeare, of course, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie.

"That's always safe to say," replied Asphodel, delighted at the attention she had drawn upon herself. "But *where*, Birkie, where?"

"You should know, Asphodel," said Birkie, growing very red, and glancing at Asphodel's mother, "for you've learnt it."

"Well, then, *you* should know, Birkie, for you *taught* it," answered her late pupil.

At this moment Fitzgerald, who had contributed a hazard of Tom Moore to the general confusion, noticed Richenda, who stood behind old Roche's chair, twisting her fingers, frowning, and shaking her head.

"You were at it later, Asphodel," said Birkie.

"And you were at it longer, then!" retorted Asphodel.

At this moment Richenda bent low over old Roche's chair.

"I have it!" Solomon Roche suddenly blurted out, extremely red. "'Tis—Cor—Cordelia in *King Lear*."

They turned with one accord to look at the old man—with the exception of Fitzgerald, who had been there long before. Sir Anthony found an eyeglass which commonly he could not remember to make use of, and fixed a moody stare upon him. The placing of the quotation had evaded Amersham completely.

"Go up one, Mr. Roche!" said Birkie.

"Father's 'coming out,'" said Asphodel.

"'But be the saints,'" quoted Fitzgerald in grim accents,

with his eyes upon Richenda, "'I'd no notion he'd come out that far.'"

Half an hour later, the ladies retired to the drawing-room, shortly followed by Solomon Roche and Fitzgerald. Sir Anthony remained behind, smoking a cigarette. Melancholy had descended on him. The sediment of a vague dissatisfaction stirred in him. He had eaten and was not full; he had been self-analytical and remained unexpressed. For some reason which he could not explain—he could hear his own laughter, as he put it to himself—laughed an hour ago, echoing still idiotically round his unmoved soul. He wanted somebody who would assure him of his own assurance. He was drifting—he wanted somebody to tell him —where. He looked up suddenly, and beheld at the far end of the room, Richenda, glancing at the clock; Richenda, buttoning on small gloves; Richenda, fully dressed in a slender black gown and black hat. Something in Amersham caught at her. He raised his voice slightly: "Night out, Richenda?"

She looked at the clock again. "No, sir. I go home every night. I don't sleep here. I must——"

She looked at the clock again, turned swiftly, and ran out of the hall.

Something wild in Sir Anthony got loose. He rose, and looked round him; then sat down, buttoning his coat quickly; rose once more, lit another cigarette, then slipped into the hall. He found his own cloth cap, which he pulled low over his eyes, his own overcoat, the collar of which he turned up high.

He was going to follow Richenda.

He slipped out into the night; it was quite dark, and sweetly scented. Richenda, he said to himself, by her look, was going to catch the tram to Dublin and he, Sir Anthony Amersham, was going to catch the same tram as the waitress, and track her to her home. It was some little way to where the tram-line started. Richenda must have run—she was not to be seen. That showed that there was no time to be lost, and Sir Anthony, who was not very slender, would be obliged to run. He began to run, a movement which he peculiarly disliked. Supposing he had mistaken the direction of the tram-line! Close by the bell of the tram sounded a warning note. He put on extra speed, and—there was the tram,—the line of which followed the line of the sea-wall,—with a background of dark, heaving sea. It looked like an illuminated yacht, he thought. Amersham had to wave his umbrella, a terribly plebeian gesture. But he was in time, and the tram quivered with his footsteps, as he mounted to the top, gripping the handrail hard.

Instinct (affinity, he called it) had told Sir Anthony that Richenda was the woman to delight in the front seat. She would love to see first what was coming; be second to nobody; have nobody brush past her; exult in the unimpeded rush of air. He looked about him cautiously, as his head rose to the level of the passengers' feet. As luck would have it, the seats were fairly full between him and Richenda, and — yes, in the first seat, he made out the figure of a tall woman in black,

with the shape of hat which he remembered that the waitress wore.

The tram moved onward in swift jerks. The keen air, seaweed laden, filled his eyes and ears, and freshened his face. Dark shapes of hills showed up behind the bay, light-sprinkled from the boats. Amersham's mood had changed from an intense melancholy to a child's delight. This was something entirely new. He had played the poet, the painter, the theosophist, the cynic, the lover, the child—but, so far, never yet the fantastic part which united the excitement of the detective's art, with the sense of discovery, astuteness, ecstasy of the artistic hunter of experience;—he knew suddenly that Balzac had taken the trouble to reincarnate in him. This young and gifted creature, in whose face tender tragedy struggled with brilliant comedy—there was some baffling, perhaps terrible, mystery in her life. To him, Sir Anthony alone, the following of the clue was to be vouchsafed. "'A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,'" he kept repeating to himself. "'A sense of mystery the spirit daunted.'"

It was a run of three-quarters of an hour into Dublin. At the beginning of Harcourt Street Richenda rose, and brushed very swiftly past Sir Anthony, who held his head well down, descending the staircase with steps that quivered through him to the marrow. He waited until he saw her step off into the street, then he descended after her.

Richenda walked extremely rapidly down a little side-

street, smelling strongly of decaying cabbage. It was impossible to keep pace with her, or, indeed, do more than keep her well within his sight. She turned sharply to the right, and plunged into a street of squalid tenement houses. A Dublin street that Amersham had never seen or dreamed of. Again she turned to the left, and began to quicken her steps. Sir Anthony had to hasten until he was out of breath, to keep her cork-screwing movements in his view. It was now very late, and the streets almost deserted, the lights extremely low. She turned again to the right, and almost immediately after, turned once more to the left. And now Richenda ran a little. Sir Anthony began to know that his temper was not exactly as it had started. Still, to follow her, he was obliged, like her, to run a little. No word had passed between them. The streets down which she passed grew meaner and meaner; Richenda's steps grew quicker and quicker.

He leaned up against a lamp-post with his hand upon his heart, his eye upon the dwindling shadow of Richenda; plucked up a little breath, and ran to the corner round which the girl had gone. Richenda had disappeared.

Hot words rose to Amersham's lips. He walked round the corner. Something blazed up in him, and he knocked deliberately, loudly, and angrily at the first door he saw. No answer came. He knocked again more loudly and more angrily.

At last a partially dressed woman of peculiarly foul aspect, showing one eye in the gleam of a street-lamp, and smelling of bad whisky, put out one half of her face.

"What d'ye want?" she shouted full in his face.

Sir Anthony stammered. "Have you seen a—a—young —a young—bull-terrier pup go down this street a few minutes since?"

"*No*," roared the woman, "but if I ketch 'm, I'll wring the dirty neck of 'm!"

She slammed the door in his face.

Sir Anthony now made four discoveries: that it was half-past eleven; that he had left his stick and overcoat in the tram; that there was not a soul to be seen; that he had not the faintest notion where he was.

IX

AT half-past ten the following morning, Sir Anthony had slunk into the Imperial Hotel by the front entrance. The sallowness of discontent coloured his skin, the lines of ill-humour pinched his features. He looked about him guiltily, then crept, extremely hungry, into the coffee-room. No Roches, no Vandravartes breakfasting! "Thank Heaven!" said Sir Anthony to himself. At the sound of his footfall both the waiter and Richenda had started up from nowhere.

As he beheld the waitress, more irrepressibly crisp than ever, a shudder of dislike for her passed over Amersham's skin. She rustled to his side. He turned his head away.

"Breakfast, sir?" said Richenda pleasantly.

Amersham made no reply.

"Breakfast, sir?" Richenda said again.

Amersham said nothing.

Sir Anthony raised his head without looking at her. "Ah—waiter?" he said, and crooked a finger at him. Richenda retreated backward, and the waiter hobbled forward on his corns. Sir Anthony, filled with delight, looked sidewise at the girl. She was extremely red.

Amersham rubbed his hands under the cloth. The elasticity of Richenda was maddening to him. He felt like a child with an india-rubber ball, who bounces it and bounces it, until one day, in the frenzy of the tyrant, at finding its self-sufficiency unimpaired, he makes a hole in it and squeezes out the bounce.

A wave of cruelty had come to Amersham at sight of the crispness of Richenda. Last night she had cost him a guinea at the Shelburne Hotel. It had taken him half an hour to return from the foul streets where he had pursued her, to the haunts of decent men; to find that the last tram had gone, that there were no more trains. He had lost his favourite walking-stick; from the lack of his over-coat he had the strongest inclination to a chill. To lose your way, your train, your walking-stick, your thirty shillings, and your eternal self-respect, for a hussy of a housemaid with a tragic dip in her mouth! Richenda was the instrument of his humiliation. He hated her. And he would pay her out.

As he took off the top of his egg, a horrible thought came to Amersham: Richenda had never once looked round last night, but what had made her run? Until this moment it had not occurred to him that Richenda could have known of his pursuit. Now he was almost certain: she had led him a deliberate wild-goose chase. She had taken him down wynds and alleys, to lead him off the true scent of her dwelling-place. Yes; she was laughing up her sleeve at him!—his flesh crept at the thought.

He turned his head cautiously, and looked at her with

eyes that would have laid bare the buried truth by burning, if they could. The impulse had flashed to his lips to enquire of her, if she had got home safe last night. In his imagination Amersham put the question to her, callously, as he cut off a rim of bacon. He would glance up suddenly, to catch a sparkle of demure mischief in her eyes—if she were guilty! He put the question to her once again, supposing Richenda to be innocent: in his mind's eye he saw the trained expression of suppressed surprise crossing her face. What was that to him, Sir Anthony, how the waitress had reached home!

Ah! exactly; that was the note to strike for his own self-assurance. Underneath the table-cloth Amersham had first rubbed, then clenched his soft, effeminate hands. Was he to stoop to let her see—it mattered to Sir Anthony in what condition she returned to her low haunts? If she had been followed, robbed, garrotted on the way, was she not still the waitress, and an impudent hussy at that! No, if she knew of his pursuit, she should learn, to her cost, he was no man to trifle with. Or, if she did not, at least Richenda would find out, that the slight interest he had evinced in her had already died a natural death, and was in no danger of a resurrection. That had been the way with all the women whom he knew—some faculty of dissimulation in them had evoked the flow of his imagination: it had played about their commonplaceness for a time, diverting itself in unlikely speculation. He had thrown the reins upon the neck of his fantasy, and allowed it to gallop madly down winding lanes in

pursuit of the soul he had endowed them with, to find itself brought to a violent standstill by the sudden opposition of the blank wall, in which they always ended. His fantasy pulled up short, his interest had expired. Now it was the same thing for him with Richenda. For her the same thing too—that inevitably overtook the women whom he knew. Poor thing! she would be disappointed—because she felt that she had disappointed him: she would be disappointed—bitterly—in herself——

"More toast, sir?"—there *was* the creature!

Sir Anthony, who had been pretending to read an account of the murder of an Englishwoman by a nigger, to account for the conscious terror in his eyes, said peevishly, twitching one shoulder and without looking up—

"Go away, girl, I am reading!"

His nerves were all unstrung; he dared not trust himself longer with Richenda, for fear that his curiosity should circumvent his prudence. There! she would see that he disliked her. He looked up sidewise again at her, and fancied that her face was troubled. Good, good! Amersham had said to himself. Poor child, poor child! Perhaps he was mistaken after all! Richenda's brightness was immured in that dark den. The vile hag who had opened the door to him was poor Richenda's mother, who had nevertheless one point of beauty in her character—a zealous care of her daughter's honour. The little woman, fanciful, like all of them, had imagined that she heard steps behind her—taken fright, and taken to

her little heels, to tell her mother that some dreadful man was following her, she thought, but who, she could not say! Ah! he was sorry to bring trouble to any little woman's face—no doubt she fancied that she had displeased him, but she would shortly learn that she had not the power to bring pleasure or displeasure to him. "With women," said Amersham to himself, as he had left the coffee-room, "I am like a child in a field of flowers, saying 'pretty, pretty!' and pulling a fistful of them for their colour's sake, then crushing them in a hot palm, and leaving them to droop and die."

The fancy, in this useful connection, pleased Sir Anthony. It flattered the mood that he was in. He had gone into the smoking-room, with his head down, leaving the door open, his mind occupied with fantastic figments, when a noise as of a rushing wind had reached him. He had looked out of the door to see Richenda flying down the empty corridor, her arms and skirts outspread from sheer delight of life.

Vaguely he felt, it was not very drooping of her. H'm! a strange piece of behaviour for a well-trained servant! If that continued, it might be necessary to report her to the management. The toleration born of pity, which had partially returned to him, gave place to redoubled irritation. He determined to avoid the creature —she got upon his nerves.

For several days Sir Anthony did not glance even at Richenda. He showed repulsion, if she waited on him. If he could help it, though, she never did. In spite of

corns, the waiter had a less obtrusive personality. Servants, said Sir Anthony, had no business with a personality.

The same morning of Sir Anthony's return from his pursuit of Richenda, the curiosity of Fitzgerald Roche had been aroused afresh by her. He had swung sharply round the door of the coffee-room, behind which the girl must have been standing with a plate in her hand. There was a collision of their persons, and the plate had fallen to the ground. At this slight accident the waiter, who was in the room, had shown an unreasonably malevolent delight, at which the girl had drawn herself up like a princess, her eyes blazing speechless passion at him. Fitzgerald had had to speak to the man, who slunk scowling, and muttering, away. From this he gathered that the man bore Richenda a grudge, bred, probably, of a jealous consciousness of some superiority in her. His interest in the waitress had been piqued by a sudden tragicness, almost, in her aspect, over which she seemed to exercise a stout control. It was so utterly dissimilar to her usual air of vital self-reliance, of buoyant appreciation of her life, that he was moved by an impulse to assure her—

"Never mind; plates aren't like hearts, Richenda."

"S'pose you'll go an' tell your—your father," she had said, with a flash of coquetry, "what a butter-fingers I am!"

"I, Richenda! I never told on a girl in my life." He saw the glint of her sea-blue eyes under long lashes, as she looked sidewise at him.

"Now I look at you"—she moved away for his breakfast-tray, which had appeared at the buttery-hatch, and looked back at him over her shoulder—"I don't believe *you* would!" She returned with the tray, setting it down before him. "Some men are beasts!" said Richenda.

"You'll believe," said Fitzgerald, beheading an egg seriously, "that I'm not one of 'em?"

"Some men,"—she continued, flicking a crumb from the cloth, "b'lieve they'd do anything for spite!"

"Richenda!" said Fitzgerald, pointing an ominous egg-spoon at her, "the garsong with the corns is laying siege to you!"

She paused, looking at him with the uncomprehending clear eyes of a child. He gathered that she did not understand the phrase. Then she burst into a shriek of girlish laughter, which she smothered with her hand over her lips, and her eyes upon the door.

"Oh, those corns!" said Richenda, dropping her voice. "Why don't he cut 'em!" She sighed deeply. "No, but he hates me, he does," she went on, "because I eat my curry with a spoon!"

"The devil you do!" said Fitzgerald. "I don't! And who taught you to do that, my girl?"

"Her Grace," Richenda said; "she taught me to take it with a spoon."

"H'm!" said young Roche; "and her Grace, I suppose, taught you to sup Shakespeare the same way?"

She lifted her delicate brows up and down.

"Shakespeare?" she said, then recovered herself. "Oh, yes; I've seen him at the theatre. *King Lear*, it was. Don't I remember all of it! Made me cry, it did, the way those two young ladies made a fool of him—the poor old man!"

"Not the first poor old man, though, by a long chalk," said Fitzgerald, under detective brows, "that's been fooled by a young lady, you know."

"Why, they are silly, aren't they?" Richenda said self-consciously. "King Leers, aren't they, all of 'em, Mr. Fitzgerald!" She had taken up a plate, and was polishing it aimlessly, her lips pursed; she giggled a little as she spoke.

"You've found that out, have you?" he remarked, taking the plate from her. "Allow me, madam. Plate waltzes are in favour at Maskelyne and Cooke's, but out of it at the Imperial Hotel."

Richenda flounced her skirts at him, and pouted more.

"Well, and you'd make 'em waltz," she said, "if you'd been frightened, like I was——"

"My dear girl," said Fitzgerald warmly, touched by a ring of grief in her voice. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I never knew you were behind the door."

"Hush—hush! Not you!" Richenda whispered, with wide eyes. "A wicked man——"

"A King Leer?" said Fitzgerald.

She nodded her head fearsomely. "Chased me such a long way home last night!" She looked down at her fingers, which were plucking at her apron. "I was all

of a shake all last night; I made my bed rattle with the shivers, like a pair o' castanets."

Fitzgerald advanced upon her, with a secret prowling step.

"Give me the blackguard's name!" he said.

The girl ran to the door, and clapped it to. "Oh, sir," she said, "don't you be callin' him bad names."

"Out with it, my girl," he said.

Richenda, with her back to the door, maintained, "Not if you was to stick pins in me, sir, to make me tell."

"Because," said Fitzgerald, pointing a fell forefinger at her, "I know the man! Is that it, Richenda?"

She drew a long breath, then looking down, she said, "Though all men are supposed to be alike, sir, aren't they—sometimes, I wonder, does one man ever know another—no matter how close——" She broke off short.

He pressed her, with an eye and finger. "Ay, my girl, no matter how close——"

"No matter how close he may watch him," ended Richenda, flashing an irrelevant smile into his face.

"Richenda, let me watch this man for you," he said.

"No, no, no," she said. "Promise me solemn, sir."

"Promises!" said Fitzgerald, with reminiscences in him of yesterday afternoon. "You should know, my girl, what *they* mean with most men."

The door heaved under their backs. Someone was

trying to get in. Fitzgerald and Richenda jumped away from it; he turned the handle, opened it, and came face to face with his father! Before he accosted old Roche, he heard Richenda take her breath.

"We're talking, Governor, of the strangeness of the human soul," he said.

The eyes of Richenda and old Mr. Roche met. Hers fell.

"Very interesting subject, me boy," said his father.

"And how, though all men are alike, one man can never know another——" Fitzgerald paused, looking the old man between the eyes, "no matter how close—now here's the point—the tie o' blood may be!"

The old man wandered through the door.

"Talkin' o' closeness, me boy, I'll rise up the window a bit. Don't you remark how warm it's turned?" he said.

Richenda hurried forward to raise the sash for him.

"On no account," Fitzgerald heard old Roche say in a low voice to her. "Allow me, now; allow me!"

X

AS the time of the dance at the Imperial Hotel drew near, the light of her constructive genius was flickering perpetually and luridly in Mrs. Roche's eye. Well might it shine! She had constructed to such purpose, that the invitations were being issued under the joint names of herself and Mrs. Vandravarte. She was quite frank to Mrs. Vandravarte about it. For she had now reached that stage of tender confidence with her, when ladies hang on, while they are speaking, to one another's furs, or play affectionately with each other's ribbons. It is equivalent to the buttonholing of a man, and blesses her that gives and her that takes, for it conveys the subtlest flattery, with the most subtle certainty of one's own position.

"I want this to be a little gem of a dance," said Mrs. Roche, touching some gilt tassels that depended on Mrs. Vandravarte's breast. "I want this to be *our* dance."

Mrs. Vandravarte made her usual camel smile at Mrs. Roche, which was no more than a muscular twitching of her loopy mouth, and got no higher than her chin. "All the trouble *I* have, is to put my hand in Solly's pocket"—here she giggled, and swung one of the gilt

tassels, which hit Mrs. Vandravarte's chin, and abruptly scared away the smile from it, "and all *you* have to do is to lend tone to it. D'you see now what I mean? And I want you to be so good, if you will, as to give me your opinion in the matter of decoration and little things like that?"

On the whole, then, Mrs. Vandravarte was not averse to the arrangement. She knew that she was expected to ask all of her own friends. Things would settle themselves quite simply, she said to herself. Over the top of the safe hedge of her set she need only crane her neck occasionally to look, and laugh, at Mrs. Roche's friends. Mrs. Roche, she believed, would have a reason of her own for not revealing that the dance was merely a flawless piece of her constructiveness, into which machinery Mrs. Vandravarte had been caught up. Mrs. Roche would naturally desire it thought by all her friends that she and the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte had become so "great" (as the saying with her circle was) that they joined forces by an instinctive amity in their society arrangements. In this way Mrs. Vandravarte would have the credit among her friends, of what Mrs. Roche called a "reshearch" dance, allied with the undeniable advantage of not having laid out one penny-piece upon it. And there would be a humorous understanding between Mrs. Vandravarte and her friends, to the effect that for the sake of their money the Roches were quite tolerable, but for themselves—not to be borne with seriously for one moment. And Mrs. Vandravarte would score again with

her own set, for her good humour in giving the Roches an opportunity of rubbing shoulders with the coagulated blue blood of the county.

The number of couples was to be limited to thirty. Mrs. Vandravarte had invited three-quarters of them, thus leaving to Mrs. Roche a bare choice of twenty carefully selected friends: those who would not endanger her position with Mrs. Vandravarte; those who would not be likely to offend Moira Vandravarte by wishing to dance with her; and those on whom the Roche-Vandravarte alliance would make a flattering and profound impression.

It was just like Mrs. Vandravarte's calm impertinence, she told Birkie, to ask forty out of the sixty people at her dance!—but then, if she was giving Mrs. Vandravarte a hundred pounds, Mrs. Vandravarte was giving her a hundred inlets into the best set. In careful construction, "concessions, Birkie, must be made on *both* sides!" Mrs. Roche said to the governess. The keen and comprehensive Birkie naturally agreed.

Certainly it was strange, Mrs. Roche and Birkie acquiesced, how Providence, unabetted, had woven the most peculiarly successful web of circumstance to draw the Vandravartes and Roches close together. Mrs. Roche herself could scarcely have improved on Providence. The necessities of the two families dove-tailed into each other. But for Mrs. Vandravarte, Mrs. Roche was well aware that the dance could never have been the exclusive little occasion that it was going to be; and but for her, Mrs.

Roche acknowledged, she could not have shaken hands with social power after power, in succession, unless through careful plotting at the end of several years. But now these triumphs were not to be spaced out at intervals over one long period, but to befall her simultaneously upon one night.

Again, the Vandravarte necessity for economy made the services of the Roche motor-car excessively convenient. For Moira and her mother, seeing they were advantageously relieved of every other cost, were having new gowns made by the best dressmakers in Dublin. One could put up very well with Fitzgerald Roche ("looking exactly like a chauffeur—so convenient!" said Mrs. Vandravarte) in the driver's seat, when that meant being able to go into town for things twice a day. And then, with those sort of people, Moira said, one need not be under the compulsion to be pleasant and make conversation, if one did not wish; for people like that were pleased with anything one did—even if one did nothing.

And so, those little senses of duties paid and returned engendered the most delightful atmosphere of mutual obligation between the Vandravartes and Roches, until a little cloud arose, concerning what Asphodel and Moira meant to wear.

Asphodel, too, was having a new dress, but at a different dressmaker's. About the subject of their make and colour, the two girls maintained a diplomatic secrecy. Each of them had strained her ingenuity of invention to the utmost point to make herself attractive. Each of

them feared that, by the least relaxation of reserve, she might be drawn into a confidential outburst, from which the other, less versed in wiles and subtleties of gowning, might draw stray hints to add them to herself. Both Asphodel and Moira, therefore, perceiving an unrelenting obstinacy upon this subject in one another, delegated their two mothers to learn by devious devices what might be expected from each other on the night of the Imperial Ball.

Moira Vandravarte had returned for lunch the preceding morning, from her last fitting in the town, when her mother, in her absence, hazarded to Mrs. Roche that she fancied that Miss Roche would look very well in green.

"A colour," said Asphodel's mother firmly, "Asphodel never wears. I imagine it would be unlucky for a mother to dress her daughter in green, before she got her married."

"So it was not *green*," said Mrs. Vandravarte to herself, looking down, and wondering how she might return to the attack without an aspect of derogatory interest. "My daughter," she observed, "is undecided now between two dresses: her new one, and the last dress she had made—only once worn—excessively becoming."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Roche in hearty mutuality, "'tis the very same way with Asphodel. Asphodel, I don't mind telling you, had some successes in her second newest frock, and she's not certain now if it doesn't

suit her better than the one she had made for to-morrow."

"Extr'ordin'ry!" said Mrs. Vandravarte in chill tones. She felt, for some reason, rather chilled. "My daughter looks her best, I think, in turquoise blue," she ventured further, at length.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Roche again; "that's Asphodel's colour, and her second last dress."

"Really!" Mrs. Vandravarte put in rather hastily, "it's the one my daughter has had made on purpose."

She had been terribly afraid lest Asphodel and Moira should appear in the same colour, thus cheapening her own daughter, and giving an impression of a degree of intimacy between themselves and the Roches, which did not, never should, exist. Now she was reassured, for she felt certain that no girl, however undecided she might be before the night, would eventually hesitate between an old dress and a new.

Mrs. Roche leant forward, and touched her knee.

"Wouldn't it be a pretty sight," she said, "if our two girls were to appear in the same colour?"

Mrs. Vandravarte made her camel smile. "Hardly probable, I think," she said; "too extr'ordin'ry!"

"Asphodel's *new* dress," said her mother, "is a pink."

Mrs. Vandravarte started, and turned red; pink was the colour of Moira's other, favourite dress. However, Moira must not be allowed to put it on—that settled it: Moira should wear her new blue gown, with all her turquoise ornaments.

"I should like to see Miss Roche in pink," she said, in more ingratiating tones than she had ever used towards Mrs. Roche. "Some girls can't wear it: you want a good clear skin."

"Which, I *must* say, my little girl *has* got," Mrs. Roche put in.

Mrs. Vandravarte rose: she was going straight to Moira. Mrs. Roche rose also, for she was going straight to Asphodel. They met at the drawing-room door, and Mrs. Roche made way for Mrs. Vandravarte to go through first. Mrs. Vandravarte turned back, as she was thrusting her way out. "Pink will suit your daughter," she said, showing all her teeth at Mrs. Roche.

In the same moment that Mrs. Roche, closeted with Asphodel, was reporting this conversation to her in full, Mrs. Vandravarte, shut up with her daughter, was relating the upshot of their interview to Moira.

"You must find out definitely, from the Roche girl," she said, "what she does intend to wear. I don't quite see my daughter wearing the same colour as Mrs. Roche's daughter—*I* can tell you, Moira."

"No, but Mrs. Roche sees it," answered Moira. "It would be just like that kind of scheming woman, to dress her daughter the same way, so that people might think we were great friends or sisters. I'm not going to be taken for Asphodel Roche's sister, I warn you. Is it likely now! I wish we had never got in with that set. I bet you anything she'll wear whatever colour I wear, just for pure spite——"

There was a tap at the door, and Richenda entered with hot water.

When she saw the figure of the waitress through the glass, Moira said to her mother under her breath, "Get *her* to find out — she'd do it — you can trust her."

Mrs. Vandravarte turned about, and accosted Richenda without further parleying.

"It has come to my knowledge, chambermaid," she said (she preferred to call Richenda this, although she knew quite well that the waitress had no upstairs work to do, except what she incurred out of good humour, when the hotel was full)—"it has come to my knowledge, chambermaid—*most* annoying!—that Mrs. Roche's daughter cannot make up her mind what dress to wear to-morrow night."

"So she tells me, madam," Richenda answered.

"You're in Miss Roche's confidence, I suppose—those sort of people always must talk to the servants. If you are, chambermaid, I wish you'd make it your business to find out what colour she *is* going to put on, as, naturally, you could scarcely expect Miss Vandravarte to wish to appear in a similar dress to Miss Roche's."

"Well, naturally, madam," said Richenda. She looked down in a deliberate way. "Miss Roche, madam, has a blue dress and a pink."

"So I hear, so I hear, chambermaid," said Mrs. Vandravarte. "Pink would be so far more becoming to her kind of style than blue."

"You want breeding to wear blue," said Moira. "A common person——"

Her mother looked at her; Moira understood: you could never tell, with servants, if they would hold their tongues or not.

"Yes, madam," said Richenda, "all well-bred people are aware of that. I heard Sir Anthony——" she stopped and looked at them dubiously. "Perhaps I'm forgetting my place?" she said, with a shy charm in her face and the pose of her figure.

"Leave that to *me*, chambermaid," said Mrs. Vandravarte. "I will tell you in good time if you are."

"In the last situation I had, I heard Sir Anthony saying to her Grace, who was a friend of his, that he hated all women in pink—but he loved all women in blue!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Vandravarte quellingly, at last, for she had now drained Richenda dry of all she needed from her. "Recommend Miss Roche, chambermaid,—I don't know your name,—to wear pink; and tell her it is *far* more becoming to her—as it *is*, isn't it, Moira?—than pale blue."

"Far more becoming!" Moira echoed.

"I shall recommend it strongly, madam," said Richenda, as she prepared to leave the room.

"Er—chambermaid," Mrs. Vandravarte called to her. "I have here——" she opened her wardrobe, and shut it with a swift snap of the lock, lest the girl should see what was inside, "a most excellent dress which I should

certainly be wearing myself, if it were not that I have burnt a large hole in the back. Take it, chambermaid."

Richenda made an inclination between a bow and a curtsey.

"All I request of you, is that you will not wear it in the daytime; it would be recognised immediately. Besides, I do not choose to see servants wearing the dresses which I myself have worn."

As the girl went out, with the dress over her arm, she put her hand to her lips, then rolled the dress into a bundle, and pitched it up to the ceiling—caught it, and chuckled to herself—a chuckle of merriment, mischief, and scorn.

Then the mischief light shone alone, as she put the bundle in the housemaid's closet, and tapped at Miss Roche's door.

XI

IN the meantime Miss Birkett had received an unexpected immunity of two hours from the guardianship of the Fluke. Late hours and spoiling had made havoc of the Fluke's nerves, and she had been unusually irritating. She had licked out an entire slateful of sums, with one sweep of the tongue, in the middle of Miss Birkett's demonstration that the result of simple division is to be found in the quotient and not in the divisor.

At this moment Mrs. Roche had come upon the scene by one door, to see, as she invariably put it, "how Margaret was getting on"—a form of observation which peculiarly annoyed Miss Birkett, since her entrance and profuse enquiries effectually put a period to all progress.

Mrs. Roche had observed warm looks of concealed abhorrence between the Fluke and Birkie, and enquired what was amiss. Birkie began:—

"I am sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Roche, that the Fluke put out her tongue——"

"I'm sure, Birkie, the Fluke would never do anything so unladylike," Mrs. Roche said hastily, scenting a quarrel which would temporarily derange her faculty of construction.

"I didn't put out my tongue at Birkie," said the Fluke. "It's a story of you, Birkie."

"My dear, Miss Birkett is your governess, and can't tell stories."

"Can't she!" replied the Fluke.

"I was going to say—I never said," replied Miss Birkett, with suppressed loathing for her pupil in her quenching eye, "that you put out your tongue——"

"You did then!" answered the Fluke, "didn't she, mother?"

"Stand her in the corner, Birkie, for contradicting, and take her pudding from her," said Mrs. Roche in sweeping settlement, as she left the schoolroom by one door, with condemnation of the governess in her eye.

Miss Birkett told the Fluke: "Get down from your chair, Margaret, and come with me." She had just led her sternly by one arm, to a corner, when Mr. Roche came in by the other door.

"Pappy, she's pinching me!" said the Fluke, and seeing her opportunity, flung herself into Mr. Roche's open arms, winding hysteric legs about her father's.

"Margaret, I am ashamed of you—ashamed!" said Birkie.

"What happened the pet, to be put in the corner?" said Solomon Roche.

"Margaret was impertinent, and contradicted, and told a story, Mr. Roche," said Birkie. "Mrs. Roche gave instructions to stand her there——"

"The pet is overworked," said Mr. Roche, "the little

brain is over-taxed. Come here to me, pet! Will I take you pick-a-back to O'Halloran's, till we get chocolates?"

"Mrs. Roche gave instructions——" began Birkie, who did not wish to be balked of her retaliation upon Margaret's malice.

"Ah, sure!" he exclaimed in loud impatience, "if the child had less elegance and more humanity shown her, we wouldn't be havin' the little nerves overstrained this way. No harm to be takin' a little holiday now, Miss Birkett, and the child will benefit by the rest."

Miss Birkett, strolling down the pathway of the garden at the back of the hotel, in a dress which was a misfit for Mrs. Roche, reflected bitterly on her chance of breaking the Fluke into that early elegance and erudition for which Birkie, as a teacher, was renowned; with a mother who expected Margaret to draw landscapes in one term, and a father who took her away in the middle of an elementary spelling lesson. The Fluke was punished by one parent's hand, while she was being petted by the other's, both in Miss Birkett's face, with no explanation given to the child of the abrupt transition from one treatment to the other. "If," said Miss Birkett to herself, "I could only have complete instruction of the child." But this could only be accomplished in sprints and stealth. For Mrs. Roche's dominating soul could not brook being eased of the least management, at the same time that her indolence did not permit the exercise of any thorough system of her own.

Again, though Mr. Roche pretended to no government

of wife, or child, or servant, in his house (since he regarded even an expressed opinion, as a hindrance to the just enjoyment of their life), he was quite capable, as Birkie put it to herself, of a weak kind of meddling, which was reached by an appeal to his paternity. He had no principle, except indulgence, of his own, and that was why Miss Birkett disliked his interference more than she dreaded the interruptions of his wife. Mr. Roche had no standard which she could capture, whereas she could usually alarm the mother of the Fluke by telling the child in her presence, "that her ignorance would be laughed at, when she went into society, and in these times to be ignorant was to be worse than vulgar."

On approaching a little summer-house, completely roofed in cockle-shells, at the far end of the garden, Miss Birkett was refreshed to find that the small seat had a masculine occupant—whom a near approach proved to be Fitzgerald.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, you frightened *me!*" said Birkie, twirling her parasol. "I thought I was alone."

"If you wish for solitude," Fitzy replied, rolling a cigarette, "there's another shanty like this further on."

"Oh, Mr. Fitzgerald, why should I turn you out?" replied Birkie, seating herself beside him.

"Why, indeed?" said Fitzy calmly. "I got here first."

For answer, Birkie cocked a roguish eye at him; she was not quite pleased, but she did not wish to show it, and she knew that her speech would.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," she said, after a pause, pursing her lips, "something's depressed you—don't tell me!"

"Wasn't going to," Fitzy replied.

"I'm very observant," pursued Birkie. "I'm not one of those that says much, but I see a good deal. I'm not one of those that's given to talking about themselves, but I'm very susceptible to the mental atmosphere of others. I don't know what it is about *me*, but I find I've more in sympathy with the male part of creation than the female. I don't pretend to understand it——"

Fitzy wagged his head. "Oh, but I do."

"I seem more drawn to them," said Birkie, beginning to get worked up.

"So I would have said," he answered. "I'm observant, too."

"Now, it's a strange thing," continued Birkie, becoming positively excited under this reciprocity of sentiment, "but I seem to have more in common with the gentlemen, somehow. It's on my hand"—again she nodded her head—"that, on more than one occasion in my life, I shall be drawn to them, for some sympathy that's in me that I can give them. Now, I don't pretend to understand it, but something drew me to this summer-house." Birkie breathed hard at Fitzgerald as she concluded.

"Glimpse of a bowler hat?" he hazarded.

"No, but something in your pose—leaning on that table. It touches something in a girl," said Birkie, who was thirty-one or two, "a girl feels stirred by it. Mr. Fitzgerald, I don't know what you're thinking of me——"

"A woman never does," said Fitzy.

"But some impulse in me will have me speak." She paused. "You've something on your mind."

He looked at her shrewdly, but said nothing. "I'm not the woman to press a fellow," continued Miss Birkett, with an air of justifiable pride in her strong character. "Curiosity's not my weak spot. But I sometimes think a man makes the mistake of locking up in his own breast a secret——"

"Secret! *A* secret!" Fitzgerald cried out suddenly. "Man—man! the air is black with 'em!"

Birkie paused—most certainly impressed.

"You alarm *me*, Mr. Fitzgerald," she remarked, and waited for more. He turned to her.

"Don't you feel that?" said Fitzgerald.

Birkie's heart fluttered.

"A secret, I was going to say—which laid before a pure woman——"

"Pure woman!" he sneered. "This is not the age for mediæval superstition——"

"A man never knows till he tries——" Birkie began after an uncertain pause.

"When he's seen something of the world and women, he's a bit afraid to try," replied Fitzgerald, with averted head.

Birkie's heart ceased its monotonous function for a space. "On some points, Mr. Fitzgerald," she faltered, "a woman's lips are sealed."

"Ay," he replied in caustic tones, "and a good job that that's so."

"Mr. Fitzgerald," she began.

He started up. "If you call me that again——" he said, looking terrible. Birkie grew pale.

"We women," she said after a pause, "don't realise the power we have over the opposite sex——"

"And the opposite sex," he hinted darkly, "*they* don't realise, until an instance of it is thrust under their very nose." He flashed round upon her suddenly. "You don't mean to say *you* haven't seen—you haven't noticed——"

Birkie looked down, plaiting her dress in her fingers. "We poor governesses—we're not supposed to notice anything—much," she murmured.

"Aye, and we poor chaps with a reputation for clowning to keep up—we're supposed to *feel* nothing," he almost shouted. "But we can—upon occasion—all the same——"

"I know," said Birkie subtly. "I know!"

He turned on her. "You don't—how should you? But I do! I alone!"

"Sometimes I wonder," Birkie said, "should that be so? Was man designed for loneliness——"

"Since woman designs, and man resigns, I should say, most certainly not." He laid his hand upon her shoulder solemnly. "But I wish, Birkie, that *woman* had been!"

"Mr. Fitzgerald," she said, "it is sad to see so much bitterness in one so young——"

"Miss Birkett," he interrupted her, "have you ever known what it is to bear within oneself——" he broke off, and turned away.

"Well do I know, Mr. Fitzgerald!" she answered.

He rose and laid his hand once more upon her shoulder. "Well, then, I may know, not a word shall be breathed of what has passed between us?"

At this moment the gravel path was loudly crunched beneath two dominating feet.

"Fitzjur'ld!" exclaimed Mrs. Roche, breaking heatedly in upon the interview. "I've scoured the place for you."

"You look like it, mother. Might have spared yourself the trouble, though: I'm more at home with dirt——"

"*Birkie!*" continued Mrs. Roche, looking from one to the other, "what's the meaning of this?"

"The meaning, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie, stammering, "is quite clear—Mr. Roche——"

"I hope it's not so clear, Birkie, as it *seems!*" Mrs. Roche said angrily, as Fitzgerald disappeared. "But if this is the way, Birkie, my daughter's education is conducted, it would be cheaper, Birkie, to send her to a boarding-school."

The abrupt descent which Miss Birkett's emotion had experienced, made her susceptible to reproof. Warmly she offered the explanation of Mr. Roche's interference; warmly she put forward the impossibility of her authority being maintained, while Mrs. Roche had certain principles and Mr. Roche had none, and her own theories were deliberately discarded first by one parent, then by another.

"That's all very well, Birkie, all very well," said Mrs. Roche, who was extremely angry at the situation between Birkie and Fitzgerald, which she would seem to

have interrupted, "but facts are facts, Birkie, and the fact is, that we have let you have your way too much, and made you too much one of ourselves. I don't believe in people presuming upon kindness, Birkie. People shouldn't forget their position, Birkie."

"Oh, very well, Mrs. Roche," said Miss Birkett, strung up to tears by now, "if we talk about presumption, you had far better, Mrs. Roche, find some one better suited——"

At this point they had reached the steps of the hotel. They looked up, and beheld Mrs. Vandravarte upon the steps, full spread over a deck-chair, and despatching Richenda on some message with one wave of the hand. "Ascertain for me," she said, "if Miss Vandravarte is with Sir Anthony."

Miss Birkett checked her emotion, and fled furiously upstairs.

XII

MISS BIRKETT refused all nourishment and consolation. She immured herself in her own chamber. Except for Asphodel, she would see nobody. Through Asphodel, she let it be known to the Imperial Hotel that she was packing. With a mixture of terror, malice, and incomprehension, the news that Miss Birkett had been crying was spread like wildfire by the Fluke throughout the place. The Fluke had entered her governess's room, in order to discover the quarter of the wind. "Birkie, your eyes are pink!" she had observed.

"Quite possible, Fluke," returned Birkie, bitterly; "so will yours, when you've had as much trouble as I have, and aren't such a rude little girl."

From the whole tenour of affairs, the enchanted Fluke gathered that she was powerful enough to have been the origin of a quarrel, for which she would not be blamed—the joyous issue of which would certainly be no lessons.

While the houses of Vandravarte and Roche caroused about a common board at half-past seven, Miss Birkett, who had got no further in her packing than to fling the contents of her wardrobe on the bed, was pacing

up and down with hatred in her soul. She would refuse entrance to every one; she would offer no apology —no, not she! Through tears, starvation and a threat of leaving, which consideration of her salary did not permit of any serious entertainment, she would bring Mrs. Roche to her senses. She hated her pupil, the Fluke, for being, as she was, the original cause of the breach. She hated Mr. Roche for his meddling; she hated Asphodel, because she did not really care for Birkie's trouble, though she pretended to. Most of all, she hated Mrs. Roche. For her look of condemnation of Miss Birkett's veracity, as she left the schoolroom; for her daring to insinuate that Birkie had forgotten herself; her words about presumption. But the real sting of Birkie's antipathy lay in the fact of the interrupted interview with Fitzy.

"Why shouldn't poor girls, who have to work for their living, enjoy themselves like rich idle girls?" cried Miss Birkett aloud, working herself into an hysterical condition; "why should their innocent joys, so few and far between, be taken from them when they come—*why* . . ."

She remembered with emotional irrelevance that she had lent Mrs. Roche a number of French novels, which occupied a prominent place upon a little table in the middle of her room. She would take them away. Directly Mrs. Roche came into her own room, she could not help observing that the books were gone. Therefore, said Birkie, with an hysterical swelling of the

throat, she would see that Miss Birkett was a woman of her word: that Miss Birkett meant to leave.

She slipped along the passage to Mrs. Roche's room. The door was standing open: before the long pier-glass Miss Birkett saw a figure standing in a rose-covered hat, and a royal blue dress, the costume Mrs. Roche had made for the Punchestown Races. Miss Birkett started, as a voice reached her, which sounded like the voice of Mrs. Roche. Her movement startled the figure at the glass; it turned round, screamed, and dropped a mirror that it had been holding.

"*Richenda!*" cried Miss Birkett in tones of sternest government.

The girl ran forward, and banged the door to, which stood ajar behind Miss Birkett. Miss Birkett and Richenda faced each other solemnly a moment. Miss Birkett's mouth wavered, the muscles of Richenda's loosened too. They burst out laughing together. Richenda shrieked, and held her sides, throwing back her rose-crowned head.

"Birkie!" she exclaimed rapidly, "what are you doing here? Birkie, I don't approve of people stealing into peoples' rooms: there's a commonness about it. And if there's one thing I can't stand, it's commonness of any kind. I can't bear a person who's not a lady."

Miss Birkett, relieved naturally of her pent-up longing for hysterics, held her handkerchief to her mouth, and swayed sidewise, with the tears running down her face. She pulled herself together suddenly, as a sense of the magnitude of the girl's impertinence broke over her.

"Richenda! I wonder that you're not——" she began. She broke off, looking steadily in Richenda's face—something in it checked her laughter—something in the girl, which made her pause. Miss Birkett was arrested.

"Just let me see you cross the room!" she said.

Richenda swept across the floor. She put into that gown an elegance and dignity which had never animated it before. There was a train to the dress. As Richenda turned, the train arranged itself about her feet in the same curves that the train of an actress's gown takes on, when she is being photographed. Miss Birkett's sense of mystery was roused.

"Richenda," she said again, taken out of herself, nodding her head up and down, "I—I believe you're—somebody."

"I've a shrewd suspicion to the same effect myself," remarked Richenda, lifting her arms gracefully to remove the hat. "I always had, Miss Birkett."

"Well," said Miss Birkett, breathing hard, with shining eyes upon her, "there's certainly something strange about you, Richenda."

Richenda looked at her shrewdly. Then she began to dance. "Oh," she said in rhythm as she danced, "so you've found that out, so you've found that out, so you've found that out, Miss Birkett!"

"I don't talk much," said Miss Birkett, in whose soul a floating malevolence towards the whole Roche family had found opportune vent in Richenda's mimicry, "but I see a good deal more than I'm given credit for. I keep

my eyes open, and I've always remarked something—" (her gratitude to the girl for slaking her thirst of revenge, blossomed in the word "distinguished" which trembled unspoken on her lips)—"something, well——"

"Something," said Richenda, with a humorous look at her, "that's not exactly a glut in the Imperial market."

"*Exactly*," Miss Birkett said with appetite. "I wonder that you—with your experience and refinement——"

"Bless their innocent hearts," said Richenda, hanging up Mrs. Roche's jacket; "they don't know the entertainment they provide"—she paused to hitch the loops of the jacket higher, and looked back at Miss Birkett with a little wink—"for people like—you and me."

"Or if they knew they were providing entertainment gratis for the *governess*,"—said Birkie, with a thankfully swelling breast.

"And the servants," added Richenda, with a return to Mrs. Roche's over-weighted accents.

"They wouldn't be quite so lavish with their entertainment," ended Birkie. "To some people, Richenda, refinement, and—and education, and—and instinctive breeding——"

"Lor' bless you, dear Miss Birkett," said Richenda, in vivacious imitation, as she stepped out of Mrs. Roche's skirt, with a little flirt of her heels. "It's 'How much money have they?'—'Did you see her rings?'—'My dear, she goes to the *Castle!*' with that sort of—h'm!"

"Quite so, Richenda," breathed Miss Birkett. "You've got it to the life—you have. How you take them off"

(Miss Birkett dare not say "her") "I don't know! But I've a strong suspicion——"

"My dear Miss Birkett, everybody in the Imperial has," Richenda answered, "about everybody else!"

"Precisely, Richenda," rejoined Birkie; "you're like me—you notice things. The amount of scheming that goes on here—why it's something frightful! Everybody plotting to do everybody else. A poor girl has no chance. A girl can't look at a man——" She paused. "You know what I mean."

"That's just what I complain of," said Richenda. She gave Miss Birkett a look out of the corner of her eye. "Now there's—there's young Mr. Roche——"

Birkie fixed her, and would not let her go. She wanted to hear what Richenda had to say about Fitzgerald.

"Speak quietly!" she said under her breath. "Yes, Richenda, what of Mr. Fitzgerald? What do they say of *him* downstairs?"

"Shall I tell you?" said Richenda shortly. "Well, they say——"

"You needn't be afraid of me, Richenda, I don't repeat things," said the thirsty Birkie.

"They say that Mrs. Roche would give her eyes to see him married to Moira Vandravarte——"

"Yes," said Birkie searchingly; she did not think it fitting to listen to Miss Vandravarte alluded to as Moira, but she dared not check Richenda's flow of confidence.

"*She* won't marry him," the waitress said. "What's more,"—she glanced aside at Birkie,—"*he* doesn't want."

"Doesn't he?" said Birkie, now all a-glitter. "What do they say he wants?"

"He wants a woman with something inside her head," replied Richenda. "There's plenty in his own."

"You're perfectly right there, Richenda," answered Birkie, drinking in every word.

"You make no mistake!" said the girl. "Men play with dolls—but marry women."

"Richenda," said Miss Birkett, "you're a woman of the world."

"Time I was, then," answered Richenda, with a pronounced hint of interestingness, "for I've seen plenty of it. I like him," she added, "there's more in him—than in all the Roches packed together. Now I should like to see Fitzgerald" (Birkie's eyes opened to their widest) "married to a *woman*" (again she gave Birkie her sidewise glance of the eyes) "a woman of refinement, of some education, character. There's stuff in him——"

"You think," said Birkie, "she'd bring it out?—a woman who had some of that?"

"I know it, Miss Birkett," rejoined Richenda. "I would help him to that sort of woman if I—if I could. Fitzgerald Roche is a cut above his people."

"So I think, Richenda," Birkie said, edging close to her. "You're really the most peculiar girl I ever met. The power of observation that you have is something remarkable. The way you take them off, and size them up——" She broke off and said deliberately, "What *are* you, Richenda?"

"If it please your Grace," cried Richenda, with a very low obeisance to Miss Birkett, "the little waitress at Roche's Imperial Hotel." She stuck her hands upon her hips, turned out her elbows, put up her chin, and swaggered, with a rhythm of the skirts, across the room.

"More like it—the little actress at the Tivoli Music-Hall," remarked Miss Birkett, noting every accent of her far-carrying voice, and every expressive gesture that she assumed. "You don't take *me* in."

"Ho, don't I?" said Richenda, still in a put-on voice; "then you're the only person that I *don't*." She looked mischievously at Miss Birkett, underneath long lashes.

"The Duchess," said Miss Birkett, "did you take *her* in?"

"'Er Gryce?" said Richenda swiftly. "Can't I speak like a real lady—when I choose! Mimicked her to her face, I did—when she weren't cross. It gave her Grace a fit o' laughin': 'You'll kill *me*,' she used to say."

Miss Birkett, completely fascinated, could not take her eyes off the girl.

"Now there's Sir Anthony," the girl continued swiftly. "I know what they say of *him* in the servants' hall; what do they say of him upstairs, eh?"

Miss Birkett, a little bit confused as to which was the real, the natural Richenda, was inclined to resent her familiarity, now that she had dropped her elegance.

"Do they think—miss," said Richenda, "that he's taken with Miss Roche?" Her eyes questioned Miss Birkett's innocently. "H'm?" she added.

"What do you think, Richenda?" said Miss Birkett, with some sense of loyalty to Asphodel, of whom she had been always fond.

"Well, if you ask *me*, miss," said Richenda, "it's my opinion that he's more taken——"

"Not with Miss Vandravarte?" said Birkie quickly.

"With Sir Anthony Amersham," said Richenda, "than with any woman born, or likely to be born, Miss Birkett."

"You're a caution, Richenda," said Birkie.

"Hush!" said the girl; "they're coming upstairs." She made for the door; then looked back. "S'pose you'll give me away, miss?"

"No, Richenda," said Miss Birkett, "have no fear."

Richenda, half-way through the door, looked round it: "Any little thing, miss, I can ever do for you,"—she whispered.

Their eyes met. "Thank you, Richenda," said Birkie meaningly. "One good turn deserves another."

XIII

THE day of the Imperial Dance arrived. Over the place there hung the brooding stillness which preludes a general excitement, broken periodically only by the tapping of carpenters' hammers, and the raised voice of Mrs. Roche. Accompanied by Richenda, who revealed a delicate and indispensable discernment in the matter of ballroom and table decoration, Mrs. Roche was scarcely less pervading than the atmosphere of ceaseless preparation. Like the earth under the sun's rays on a dog day in July, there seemed to go up from Mrs. Roche an atmospheric tremor of vitality which exhausted everybody but Richenda and herself. Between the girl and Mrs. Roche, there seemed to be a reciprocity of domination which worked wonderfully in the common weal. Although the girl was perforce under the physical control of the proprietor's wife, on the other hand, Mrs. Roche was insensibly beneath the spell of Richenda's mental governance. She betrayed a quiet but extraordinary interest in the arrangements for the dance, never giving an opinion, unless deliberately evoked; when she would speak with such assurance of what her Grace

did in such and such a case, that there was no help for Mrs. Roche, but in following the precedent of the Duchess.

Upstairs, upon their separate beds, with curling pins upon their heads, and novels in their hands, lay Moira Vandravarte and Asphodel Roche. They were reported to be "saving up" for the night, what they were both incapable of exhausting—their vital energies. Light, nourishing food—of a character which would not dull their eyes, or bring out a flush upon their noses—was served them in their rooms, to spare them that expenditure of vitality entailed by a descent to the coffee-room. To their languid bedsides the crumbs of current report were carried by their watchful mothers. They sat upon their daughters' counterpanes, and speculated inwardly, from the aspect presented by the girls, on the chances of their ultimate appearance under gas. But on the subject of what colour Moira meant to wear, Mrs. Roche could bring her daughter no more encouraging report than Mrs. Vandravarte could bring to Moira of Miss Roche.

As the night approached, the trustworthy Richenda was bandied to and fro between the Vandravarte and Roche bedrooms to ascertain, if possible, for each, what colour either girl seemed likely to select at last: All that the waitress could console their separate anxieties with, was an observation to Miss Roche that Miss Vandravarte had laid out both dresses on her bed; to Miss Vandravarte, that Miss Roche was utterly undecided between two.

The situation became intolerable to Moira Vandravarte.

An hour and a half before the dance began, she knocked at Asphodel's door.

"Oh, I can't be bothered with anybody now," Asphodel's voice sounded from within.

But it was not Moira Vandravarte's business to be discouraged at this moment by any obstacle under heaven or earth. She entered calmly, carrying a powder puff, and various toilet implements with her, as if she had not heard.

"D'you mind my sharing your room, Miss Roche,—like an angel?" she remarked with her usual insolence of manner; "it's too annoying — I've no full-length glass in mine. But what can you expect in a place like this!"

It occurred suddenly to Asphodel—who had turned round, looking not at all celestial—that by this proximity she must finally learn if Moira Vandravarte was wearing pink or blue.

"Well, you can come," she remarked, nodding her head graciously; "but it'll be very awkward, if we both want the long glass at the same time."

"Oh, I expect we shall manage somehow," answered Moira, who knew in her own mind exactly how.

There was a pause, during which they overlooked each other, and Moira, staring steadily below the frill of Asphodel's petticoat, said to herself, "Thank heaven, that *I've* not got thick ankles."

"Some girls," said Asphodel aloud, at the long glass, "have such dreadful salt-cellars in their neck. I thank

my stars I *haven't* salt-cellars; I think salt-cellars spoil a girl—don't you?"

Moira Vandravarte let down a rope of magnificent fair hair to her waist. "It's so awkward," she said angrily, at the small glass, "not being able to see to the *end* of one's hair."

At this point she glanced aside at Asphodel, whose own dark hair covered, but came no lower than, her shoulders.

"I don't know what you want to see the end for?" answered Asphodel, who began to arrange her hair upon her head, uncertain as to whether she were wise or not, in letting Moira into the secret of a fashion of her own which had always been admired.

"It's such a nuisance," replied Moira, "having such a lot."

"I always notice," answered Asphodel, "that the girls with too much hair make far less show with it than people with not quite so much. It makes a person's head look clumsy—having too much hair; and you have to screw it up so tight, one gets no more credit for having lots, than for having none."

"Men like a woman with a lot of hair," said Moira. "D'you pull out much?" she added. She came behind Asphodel at the long glass, and tried to fit in a full-length aspect of herself, twisting and turning to avoid Miss Roche.

"That much!" answered Asphodel, showing her a comb with two or three hairs in it. "D'you call that a

lot? Show!" She caught at Miss Vandravarte's comb in her hand. "Why, *you* pull out twice as much."

"I can spare it, you see," said Moira, turning down her mouth. "I should have my ends cut, if I were you, Miss Roche," she added.

"Thanks, I don't want to," returned Asphodel firmly. "My hairdresser says my hair's the most uncommon shade he ever saw: it couldn't be matched, he says. He can hardly be got to cut it."

"Why do you want to match it?" said Miss Vandravarte. She edged herself in front of Asphodel at the pier-glass.

On the spur of the moment Asphodel could think of nothing better to say than "I don't want to match it, thank you!"

There was a long pause, during which the obstinacy of each was apparent to them both, and they despaired of getting nearer to the knowledge they mutually desired.

Asphodel said suddenly: "What is your favourite colour in the evening?"

"Oh, you would, would you!" said Moira to herself. Aloud she answered, inspecting her chin closely in a hand-glass—

"I don't know. I can wear every shade. One merely wants a good clear skin."

"Have you a spot coming?" Asphodel enquired calmly, as she observed the movements of Miss Vandravarte.

"Heavens, no! I never have them," said Moira, reddening, "but just a little roughness. It's the poorness

of the food." She paused. "What are you going to put on?"

"I never know," Asphodel replied, "till the last moment."

There was another pause. Miss Vandravarte was wasting time: she had nothing more to do, and yet she dared not go.

"Look here," she said, to cover that embarrassment by plunging herself into another, "would you mind that—that little——"

"Spot?" said Asphodel cheerfully, examining the area offered her on Moira's skin. "I thought you said you never had one."

"So I never do, except this one. I'm certain it's the food." Miss Vandravarte pouted and frowned at herself. "Would you mind it? D'you think it will be noticed?" she said peevishly.

"Good gracious! people don't look at one so closely as all that," said Asphodel, covering something invisible on her forehead with a tiny dab of powder. "One needn't flatter oneself——"

She turned round. Moira faced her. "I shall really have to get into my dress now," she ended.

"So shall I," said Miss Vandravarte.

"You might have brought it with you," replied Asphodel.

Miss Vandravarte frowned. "I can't get into my dress without my maid," she said, opening the door. "I wonder how you manage!" She banged the door behind her

slightly as she went out. Asphodel went to her wardrobe.

"I hate cunning," she said aloud, for she was angry with Miss Vandravarte's last hit, "but I reckon that Richenda's last tip for *this* race will make us quits, Miss Vandravarte."

Meanwhile, beneath the bedroom windows at the back of the hotel, Sir Anthony walked in the garden cool. He had dressed and dined, and was waiting for Richenda, whom he had sent indoors for Turkish cigarettes. He had not long to wait, before he heard her skirts over the grass; he turned and watched her coming in the dusk. Amersham noticed now for the first time that Richenda's gown had a little train to it; he watched it slip across the grass. As the waitress came towards him, Sir Anthony hesitated, and then spoke in slightly pompous humour—he did not wish to condescend to her, and yet he wanted some one to appreciate his thought.

"Do you know, Richenda—isn't that your name?—what your skirt reminds me of—slipping across the grass?"

"Why no, sir," she said a little breathlessly, because she had been hurrying.

"One of those black, wrinkled slugs," said Amersham, "one sees trailing over the lawn at night."

"Oh goodness, Sir Anthony," she said, "they're so sticky! This came by the last mail for you."

There was a little look of hesitation, or of anxiety, upon her face. She held out a flat cardboard envelope to him. He took it slowly with tentative fingers.

"Richenda," he said, in sudden tones, and after he had peered at the address, "I know what this is!" He gripped the sides of the packet, and tore it twice and thrice across, with swift, fierce movements of the thumbs.

"Now–w," said Richenda, with reproach in the aspect of her drooping lip, "what do you go and do that for!"

"Because I——" said Sir Anthony with unreasonable violence, "because it——it's a photograph, Richenda. There—and there." He tore the cardboard twice across again, and threw the pieces on the grass.

"Oh—say!" Richenda murmured, going down upon her knees, "you might have liked it—if you'd only looked." She sought in the grasses with her fingers, and brought up some little fragments in her palm. Sir Anthony bent, and on an impulse, raked among the pieces with a long fore-finger.

"Look there," Richenda said in low, reproachful tones. Still on her knees, and looking up at him with her mysterious, dark eyes, she pointed to a scrap of the torn face.

"By George!" he murmured, "what a mouth! H'm! I wish—well, what's in a mouth!——"

He held the fragment sentimentally on his own palm.

Richenda rose from her knees. "Why, such a lot of kisses, sir," she said, with challenge in her eyes, "in a mouth like that——"

He looked at her swiftly; his figure moved slightly to

one side—her side. He stiffened, remembering the pursuit of her.

"Perhaps," he said, still looking at the scrap of paper, and the pose, the accents, the restrained, regretful lips were those of the stage hero looking at a little handkerchief that his love has left behind—"perhaps, Richenda, after all, it might have been very nice!"

"Hssh!" said Richenda, with a changed manner. She jerked her elbow in the direction of the hotel windows, and covered her mouth with the back of one hand.

"What!" said Sir Anthony, finding the monocle, "we are observed?"

"No—look up!" she whispered, with her eyes flashing mischief.

Asphodel Roche stood up at the pier-glass before her bedroom window. On either side of her a blaze of candles burned.

"Follow me!" whispered Richenda, stealing across the grass. He followed the black sweep of her gown, until they stood beneath the window. Richenda made a gesture with her hand for Amersham to raise his eyes. In this position they had a view of Asphodel in profile. She was curtseying and smiling, as she stood before the glass.

"Richenda, who is that?" said Amersham, a little startled.

"Miss Asphodel Roche!" she said.

"What is she doing?" Sir Anthony enquired.

"Dressing," answered the girl.

"She's talking!" he observed. "To whom?"

"Why—to herself, sir," said Richenda, bending her supple body into the lines of laughter.

"Good heavens!" said Sir Anthony. "What does it mean?"

At this moment Asphodel, shutting her eyes, and then opening them again, bowed low at herself from the waist, and smiled with a terrible sweetness.

"What does it mean? That's—'Well you may have this dance, if you *like*, Sir Anthony,'" said Richenda. She repeated the gestures of Asphodel as she spoke.

"Sir Anthony!" he exclaimed.

"Just the first name I thought of," she said, shooting looks of coquetry at him in the semi-darkness.

Asphodel Roche opened her eyes, and lifted her brows, then moved a little forward, eagerly.

"What's that?" he whispered, fixing the monocle for certain.

"That's—'Well I think we *will* sit this out!'" said Richenda.

"Good heavens!" said Sir Anthony again. He wiped his brow.

Asphodel Roche drew herself up to her full height, narrowed her eyes, arched her neck, and while her lips moved, rained scorn from her grey eyes.

"'You must take no liberties with me, Sir Anthony,'" breathed Richenda, at his side. Unconsciously, almost, she went through the same pantomime towards the window.

"Terrible!" exclaimed Sir Anthony. "I promise I will not—oh, indeed I will not!" He moved a little nearer to the waitress.

Asphodel's eyes filled with a languishing light. She sank her head to one side, trifled with something in her fingers, and her whole figure expressed complacent acquiescence.

"And *this*?" he whispered.

"Well," murmured the interpreter, compliance in the drooping of her figure at his side. "'Just *one*—if you *really* must——'"

"Richenda," said Sir Anthony, "I am so terribly alarmed, I really *must*——" He sought in the dusk for consolation close at hand. For a moment he found some fingers, and a little waist.

She sprang away from him, with the sudden fluttering movement of a bird.

"I—I really *must* not," said Sir Anthony, following her, —"look any more. You can have no conception of how this upsets my—my preconceived——"

"You," she exclaimed, speaking with infinite reproach. "What have *I* done, for you to treat me like that?"

"Done, my dear child?" said Amersham, "you have done me the greatest kindness. You interrupted me: you have no notion what I meant to say: I really must—thank you! I was becoming interested in her. You have warned me in time, Richenda——"

"In *very* good time, sir," she said. She moved across the lawn. Amersham followed her.

"Richenda—you are distressed," he remarked, "and so am I——"

Just before the back entrance to the hotel, she turned.

"Oh, sir," she said, with her breath coming short, "are *all* men like that?"

"And all women," he answered, with a gesture of abandonment towards the bedroom windows, "are they —like *that*? Is this what Shakespeare means by 'holding the mirror up to nature'? Oh, most pernicious woman! Richenda, tell me; I must know. Do *you*, too, permit persons in the glass to give you—ah—just one——"

She flashed round on him suddenly, and he fancied that he actually saw tears in her eyes.

"Many and many a time!" she said with a kind of defiant whimsicality. "Not just one, but a hundred and hundred times one, they've kissed me—persons in the glass—they have——"

"But when, Richenda?"

"When persons *out* of the glass," said Richenda, "wouldn't—wouldn't——"

She coloured violently, dropped her voice, turned down her eyes, and folded her hands, as the rustling of a silken dress came rapidly towards her.

"Richenda!" cried Mrs. Roche, "I can't permit a servant to raise her voice like that. A servant has no business——" She remembered suddenly the service that the girl had rendered in the matter of Asphodel's dress for to-night. "But I am sure," she added with imperial grace, "I shan't have to speak to you again, Richenda."

"Oh, no, madam," the girl said meekly, "I shall not give you the chance."

Mrs. Roche darted upon Amersham like a kingfisher upon its prey. "Oh, Sir Anthony, I was looking everywhere for you," she said.

"As I, dear Mrs. Roche," he answered, "as a matter of fact, have been looking high and low for *you!*"

XIV

WHEN she discovered herself standing between the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte and Sir Anthony Amersham, as the guests began to arrive, it was a moment of magnificent delirium for Mrs. Solomon Roche.

She did not notice the camel smile of Mrs. Vandravarte, as she began to realise that she was actually saying to all of her friends, "Allow me to introduce you to the Honourable Mrs. Norman Vandravarte, to whom more than half the credit of to-night is due."

Nor did she observe the mutinous mouth of Amersham, as she led him to her twenty guests, and said, "I want you to know our friend, Sir Anthony Amersham,"—with the close aside to each,—"such a darling man!—you'll love him."

In patches she was aware of flattering faces, fulsome words, surging towards her from the selected specimens of her set. She was over-weighted by a prevalent conviction of her enormous cleverness: the chosen twenty saw to that.

"Wonderful woman!—Makes everything she handles a success. Perfect genius for organisation!"

These things the twenty said, when they were con-

scious of Mrs. Roche's vibrant neighbourhood. They were converted into, "How did she manage it?—Mrs. Vandravarte and she seem great already.—Wormed her way into the best set at last.—She's as cute as the devil.—Trust Mrs. Solly Roche!"—when the twenty were unconscious of her absorbent contiguity.

A remark of Amersham's—in the abominable taste which he occasionally cultivated—made her suddenly aware that one thing was lacking as the crown of her success,—Asphodel's appearance in Sir Anthony's favourite colour, the centre of his attraction, the most talked-about girl of the night. Mrs. Roche had just been introducing him to a woman in rose-pink with a hot skin and fair hair.

"I loathe pink women: they remind me of ham sandwiches. I despatched her in one gulp—one dance, I mean.—Too much butter, Mrs. Roche. Please—no more ham-sandwiches. But introduce me to blue girls,—as many as you please. They remind me of Longfellow's line about the stars: he calls them the forget-me-nots of the angels."

Sir Anthony was standing between Mrs. Vandravarte and Mrs. Roche, as he said this, in the most affected of his moods.

Mrs. Vandravarte, who had not the faintest notion what Sir Anthony was saying, and had merely inserted an "Extr'ordin'ry" whenever a hiatus occurred for her to put it in, was also suddenly reminded of her daughter by his observations on the subject of pale blue. Seeing the face of Richenda for a second in the doorway of the ball-room,

she had a message conveyed to her to the effect that she was to go to Miss Vandravarte and bid her come downstairs immediately. "I cannot imagine," she said to Mrs. Roche, "what makes my daughter so extremely late. Extr'ordin'ry!"

"And my child too!" returned Mrs. Roche with sympathetic movements of the body. "I only hope to goodness something in her dress hasn't given way at the last moment." They craned their necks to watch the entrance to the ball-room. Then Mrs. Vandravarte made an audible exclamation, as Mrs. Roche drew in her breath. Asphodel Roche made her appearance by one door, at the same moment that Moira Vandravarte came in by an entrance opposite. On the threshold they paused mutually, glaring at each other: both Asphodel and Moira were in turquoise-blue; both wore turquoise ornaments.

"Ah, nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Roche, perceiving this: she flushed, partly from pride, partly from annoyance, and a certainty that Mrs. Vandravarte was vexed. "They look like sisters—" She glanced at Mrs. Vandravarte's face—"they're so different," she hastily added. "Dark and fair!"

"I confess I cannot see the least resemblance," said Mrs. Vandravarte. She was excessively annoyed, for the sudden appearance of the two handsome girls in the same colour, had drawn the whole attention of the ball-room to them. Her apprehension created a palpable conviction for her that every one was saying, the Vandravartes and Roches had become such friends, that the girls dressed alike.

"A most peculiar coincidence!" said Mrs. Roche to Mrs. Vandravarte.

"*Most* peculiar!" said Mrs. Vandravarte to Mrs. Roche. Each of the hostesses perceived the vexation of the other, each pulled herself together in time to prevent its audible escape.

"Mrs. Vandravarte," said Mrs. Roche to herself, "will go round telling every one this is not our dance, but that I've dragged her into it for show."

"Mrs. Roche," said Mrs. Vandravarte to herself, "will go round telling every one she's paid for the whole thing, when I've given them to understand the dance is chiefly mine."

"But you needn't be afraid," said Mrs. Roche, aloud, to Mrs. Vandravarte, "that they'll be taken for each other."

"I confess that hadn't entered into my consideration," the other hostess said.

"There's something in Miss Vandravarte,—I don't know what it is," continued Mrs. Roche, "that I don't see in another girl in the room. But I know what it is,"—she took a few steps in the direction of her daughter,—"it's *blood!*" she whispered.

"I shouldn't be surprised," retaliated Mrs. Vandravarte—thrusting aside with her whole body, as was her wont, whenever she moved abroad, whomever came in contact with her, before or behind—"I shouldn't be surprised," she said in wilted accents, "if these people call Miss Roche the belle of the ball!"

In conclusion they beamed upon each other in sweet

hatred. Sir Anthony, among whose virtues that which distinguishes the violet could not have been numbered, perceived, in the admiration created by the two girls, an occasion for conspicuousness that he was not going to miss. He ambled up to them, and while they eyed each other in distaste, engaged them in conversation for the appreciation of the whole room. Mrs. Vandravarte, close at hand, heard every word.

"Twin forget-me-nots!" he exclaimed in suave mischief, conscious of her presence, "from the same, unforgettable stem!" He turned, seemed to search for Mrs. Roche, and finding only Mrs. Vandravarte, bowed to her. "How sweet of you to be in blue! how did you know it was my favourite colour?"

"*I*," said Miss Vandravarte with her contemptuous movements, which disclaimed the kinship of humanity with everybody in the room, except her mother and Sir Anthony, "hadn't the ghost of a notion, Sir Anthony, what your favourite colour was!"

"Well, I just did then," said Asphodel, scoring an audacious point. "I guessed it was your favourite colour,"—she nodded her head,—"because it's mine!"

"Oh *really!*" said Moira, trying to get Amersham to laugh with her; "you must be curiously alike."

He turned to Moira seriously. "We have some points in common," he said to her. "Miss Roche and I: incurable vanity——"

Asphodel's eyes opened to their widest.

Moira Vandravarte laughed loudly.

"Inveterate love of posing——"

"Me!" said Asphodel.

"—And insatiable desire to make ourselves conspicuous by singularity."

"I think you're very *rude!*" said Asphodel.

"Dear child," said Amersham, in unloving tones, "we have yet another point in common. And don't you see that's where our charm lies—and our essential Irishness?"

Asphodel gave him a look like that expression of infinite reproach which a cat turns on you, when you have ousted him from your knees.

But the sting of Sir Anthony's rudeness was immensely mollified by the coupling of her name with his. She pouted doubtfully. Sir Anthony was not comfortable about his own good taste.

"Miss Roche," he added, hastily, "you may not think it, but I'm a disappointed man!"

She nodded her head, rejoicing in a conversation in which Miss Vandravarte was too proud and slow at repartee to show to her advantage.

"I've heard of plenty of those men, Sir Anthony," she said. "When a man talks of being disappointed, a man means a woman to understand that one of the opposite sex has done it. But if you ask *me*, from *my* experience of the world, I've come to the conclusion, that your disappointed man is a man who's begun by disappointing some girl, and ended by being a disappointment to himself."

"Very true, dear child," he answered in freshly patronising tones, "very intuitive and true, as a superficial generalisation, but——" he looked at his beautiful nails, and shook his head—"but in this particular case neither true—nor—intuitive."

He knew he had them there! He felt them fix their innocent eyes upon his face, trustful of some romance.

"It—it *was* a woman," he concluded. "She—she wore turquoise-blue,—so that, whenever I see a woman in that colour—something—something desperate seems to get loose in me——"

"How did she disappoint you?" enquired Moira, never in the least afraid of hurting peoples' feelings. She was vaguely disappointed—they both were—to hear of this woman who had power to disappoint Sir Anthony —yet there was consolation in the fact that he was disappointed.

"She—she had the prettiest little ways,—*I* thought," he said in hesitating tones, "I ever saw. I thought them so unstudied: they seemed like the unconscious beauty in the gestures of a child. I never tired of watching them. Once I—I asked her if she knew what fascinating ways she had. She said, no one had ever told her that before: that I should make her conscious, if I did." He paused. He felt the extraordinary interest he had awakened in the girls in blue. He dropped his voice. "That night," said Amersham, "walking in the garden, in my happiness, I wondered if I dared ask her to be—my wife. Then I happened

to look up at her window.—It was a blaze of light. Before her mirror stood—no, I reserve her name—that woman. She went through in pantomime before my eyes (you may imagine how well she did it for a simple man to follow what she meant)——"

"What?" said Asphodel breathlessly.

"My proposal of marriage to her, that she expected," Amersham said heart-brokenly. "The little start of surprise, the downward look, the first tremor of the young girl, the relenting—hesitation; finally, the abandonment of herself to me."

He looked up. Neither of the two girls seemed quite comfortable. "All admirably done!" said Amersham with the sarcasm of heart-break.

"What an affected beast!" exclaimed Miss Vandravarte, with self-conscious twistings of herself.

"No wonder you're disappointed in girls," said Asphodel.

He turned to Moira. "Tell me," he said with his frankest manner, "*you* would not have done that?"

"I should think not," she answered. He turned to Asphodel. "And you?"

"Catch me!" she answered.

"Ah!" he returned, "and supposing that I did?" She flounced her dress at him and frowned.

"*You'd* catch it!" she replied.

"But I have far too much respect for you," said Amersham, "to entertain for one moment the possibility of catching you out."

"I should hope so!" Asphodel answered.

"You can understand, perhaps," said Sir Anthony, appealing to the two, "how a simple man in pursuit of his correlative simplicity might become a misanthrope——"

"I might," said Asphodel, "if Johnson's *Dictionary* were by."

Moira withered her, for trying to be smart.

"The last thing that a man tires of seeking in a woman," Amersham said profoundly, "is Nature——"

"Still it's the first thing that bores him, when he's found it," answered Asphodel.

"Possibly, very possibly," he said in chilled tones: it was all that he could find to say. Hurriedly he booked some dances with the girls in blue, and drifted aimlessly away. It was not at all his object to become re-interested in Asphodel.

XV

FITZGERALD ROCHE had spent the best part of the evening dancing with Miss Birkett. The reason for this deliberate selection lay, not in the seductiveness of Birkie, but was the legitimate offspring of Fitzgerald's contrariety. Wherever he might move, the eyes of his mother drove him, as a collie-dog a sheep, in the direction of Miss Vandravarte. At the beginning of the dance she had remarked to Moira, with a jocosity which overlaid a deep significance, "Full as you'll be, I hope you'll keep a few dances for my poor boy." After which, she crossed the floor to Fitzgerald, and told him that it would *never* be forgiven, if he ignored the daughter of any one to whom she was so much indebted, from a social point of view, as Mrs. Vandravarte. Perceiving that conventional obligation was going to have no weight with him, she had changed her tactics, and added with a diplomacy which would have driven any other man into her fold, "And you'd better be quick about it, Fitzjur'ld; the men are simply swarming round her. She'll end by having to divide her dances."

She made several attempts to separate her son and Birkie—with whom, since Birkie's threat of leaving had

filtered ineffectively away, she had been on terms of chill magnificence. She had come up to Fitzgerald, apparently unconscious of the Expectation in Sequins, addressed some intimate and hurried words to him, looked round, raised her brows, and exclaimed, "Oh, Birkie, are *you* there?" In conclusion, she surveyed the sequins through a lorgnette, which was of even less use to her than his monocle to Sir Anthony, and walked away. By this behaviour it was the design of Mrs. Roche, first, to flutter Birkie, then, to make her uncertain of her ground; finally, to fling over Fitzgerald in one of Birkie's sulks, in which, Mrs. Roche knew well, she usually preferred to dock herself of everything in reason and out of it, rather than be deprived of her favourite aspect of long-suffering governess.

When Fitzgerald overheard his mother play her last persuasive card, by allowing him to hear her say to some one, "I believe that boy of mine would do anything for his mother!" it confirmed him in a resolution to practically usurp the whole of Birkie's programme. Although he found her piercing intuitions, her keen silence, her pregnant sympathies, more draining than he cared, it was comfortable to know that, by merely saying, "Oh, come on then, I s'pose we'd better have another!" he had outwitted the constructive genius of his mother, and filled the breast of somebody with thankfulness.

As the night wore on, however, he began to feel extremely hot, and to wonder how he might break the chain of circumstance and contrariety which bound him

so closely to Miss Birkett. When the one dance that Moira Vandravarte had meted out unwillingly to him came on, he confided to Miss Birkett that his collar was extremely limp, and he was going to his room to change it. Why should he hold himself contracted to Miss Vandravarte, who, more than likely, had pretended that she could not read the initials that he had scribbled on her card, and given his waltz to Sir Anthony? Besides, added Fitzgerald, one could always say with an air of suspecting grudge which would imply foul play on the woman's side, that one had looked high and low for her, and—in short, where was she when *theirs* came on?

He left Birkie very happy, thinking that he preferred a clean collar to Miss Vandravarte, and went upstairs yawning, and stretching his arms, to relieve them from the feeling of Miss Birkett in them. For some reason which he could not explain, Fitzgerald found himself treading with cautious mystery along the deserted corridors upstairs. As he approached his bedroom, which lay on the other side of his mother's room, a little low ecstatic humming reached his ear from one of the bedrooms: the kind of happy humming that a good-tempered child makes over a new toy. It was a curiously happy note; apart from the surprise which it created in him from its unexpectedness at that time of night, there was some intrinsic little charm of peacefulness in it which fascinated Fitzy. He crept along towards his mother's room, from which the humming seemed to come; he looked round the corner of the door.

Richenda was sitting on Mrs. Roche's bed, her back to him, with the electric light full on. Her legs were crossed, she was humming to herself, and underneath the blaze of light she was stretching up a long white hand. As she hummed, she turned her hand, then looked at it, and turned it again. On the third finger of Richenda's hand there gleamed a half-hoop of brilliant rose-diamonds.

Fitzgerald Roche grew cold about the heart.

"Richenda!" he said, in so terrible a voice that he himself was shaken by it, as it came from him. He thrust the door to with his foot, fearful lest his tones should stir the hotel with their echoes into alarm; then he strode towards the bed. "Now!" he exclaimed, "I've got you!" He seized her by the wrist.

The girl grew perfectly pale. She had risen from the bed without a word, but his grip forced her down again. Richenda's eyes looked into his, fettered with fear—expressionless. A swift look of guilt crossed her face, the slim wrist tried to turn in the bite of his strong fingers. Suddenly her whole face changed: she flashed a look of brazen impudence at him, and began to giggle, then to scream with laughter.

"Ha, ha!" she said. "Caught, this time, am I? I don't care! Let go!"

"One word," said Fitzgerald, "and I rouse the place."

She became perfectly quiet, and beat her heels sulkily on the floor, as she sat.

"Caught, are you?" he said. "A bit! You don't

care? We'll see, my lady, about that, by and by. Let go?"

"Yes, drop it," she said; "you'll break my arm."

"If you try to move," said Fitzy, "that's what I'm going to do. Now, see?"

She began to shake her head, and sob a little, darting looks at him. "Why, yes—I won't, I won't; you've got me in your power—you can do what you like with me—tell them all—take me to gaol—only—" she writhed a little bit towards him, "don't—*don't* hurt me so."

"Bah! I don't hurt you so easily as *that*, me girl," he said contemptuously.

She turned her arm round in his fingers: "Look!" she said, with a tremulous lip. There was a red ring round the wrist which she held up to him.

"*I* didn't do that!" said Fitzy quickly.

A tear fell from Richenda. "You did," she said. "I was—happy till you came."

"Oh, you were, were you? Ay, I'll bet you were."

"But you—you don't know *how* unhappy you've made me."

"Come now," said Fitzgerald sternly, "tell me the whole story, me girl."

"I've—I've nothing to tell——" She shook her head and sobbed. "It's mine—it's mine."

"Come, that's one too good," said Fitzgerald. "Own up, and I'll let you down as easy as I can; but tell me lies, and I'll not have the faintest mercy on you. You

say it's yours?" he said with an accentuated pause, during which he stared into her eyes until they fell; "you dare tell a man like *me* a cock-and-bull story like that! How would a girl of your class come by a ring of that kind?" He shook her wrist; she shook her head. "H'm! Won't tell? Eh? Well, there's one thing you can tell me, perhaps"—he pointed in the direction of the dressing-table. "What's my mother's jewel-case doing there; and how comes it to be open, me girl?"

She turned round quickly. "I swear she left it open."

"Now—now! don't swear," he said.

"She *trusts* me," the girl cried.

"Then a darned sight more shame for you!" he answered. "You're not quite so clever, Richenda," he ended, "as I thought you were. You little fool"—he shook and gripped her wrist again—"d'you suppose I don't know every ring that my mother has in her case?"

"You're a hard man," she said, with a sob.

Fitzy was glad to hear of it. "I am, am I?" he demanded.

"You'll have no mercy on me——"

"None!" he answered, "if you tell me lies." He turned the slim wrist tighter in his fingers. "You meant to steal it? Yes?"

The torture of the twisting made her cry out sharply, but she cried out "*No!*"

He twisted a little tighter. "You weren't going to take it?"

She hesitated; then the pain made her nerves give way. Richenda fell at his feet, and cried out lamentably—

"Yes, yes, yes, I was—I was going to take it. I'll tell you everything. I'll keep nothing back. I'm a—I'm a kleptomaniac—I—I always was——"

"What the devil do you know about kleptomania?" said Fitzgerald. He paused. "And are you aware, madam, that you're not talking as you used to do?"

He watched her keenly; she wrung her hands.

"I—don't know what I'm saying," said Richenda. "What do I know about it?—a great deal too much. It's my one sin—I can't help it. I can't truly. You don't know how it worries me."

"I should think it would," said Fitzy grimly.

"From a child"—she rose, wiping her eyes—"I was that way. It was in my blood. It comes over me sometimes, and I don't know what I'm doing. But one thing I know"—she wiped her eyes again—"the time will come when crime isn't treated like sin—but like *disease*. It isn't right——"

"You're right," said Fitzy, "it isn't."

She turned to him suddenly. "I throw myself unreservedly on your mercy——"

"No, there's not much reserve about *you*," he answered.

"Let me off, sir, this once——" She paused, looking keenly at him. Steps came along the corridor. They listened. Into the face of both a look of recognition

came. "Ah!" she cried, "*I* know what you're going to do——"

He made a movement forward, caught her hand, and slipped the ring from it.

"Tell him! Tell your father!" said Richenda.

"Ay," he answered, with his face lighting, "bright notion that, Richenda! Good for you, me girl! It's a pity you can't find better uses for the wit you have. No, you don't!" The girl had made a movement towards the door. He caught her by the wrist and forced her back. "You stop here. I can't prevent you from eavesdropping, but I can prevent——" He had snatched the key from the inside of the room. Now he turned it from the outside on the girl, and with his back against it, looked first up, then down, the passage.

To the left of him he caught a glimpse of old Roche's beard peeping round the door of his dressing-room. Fitzgerald made a massive movement of beckoning with the key.

"Here, Governor," he said, "a word with you!"

XVI

HE noticed that his father wore a frightened expression, as he came along. Fitzgerald beckoned him once more, then held out a forked hand, on the little finger of which sparkled the diamond ring.

"Here, Governor," Fitzy said again, "ever see the like o' that before?"

"The like o' what, me boy?"

"That ring?" said Fitzy, with the hand still pointing. Old Roche bent, and examined the finger.

"Certainly, me boy," he said, looking Fitzgerald full in the face.

"Oh, you did, Governor? Where?"

"I'm greatly mistaken, Fitzjur'ld, if 'tisn't the ring I put on your mother's hand, when she promised to be mine——"

"Ay," said Fitzgerald, "that's so, Governor. You would be so."

"Did she drop it any place, Fitzjur'ld?" enquired his father. "An' you're after pickin' it up, I s'pose!" He made a few steps towards his dressing-room again. "Where did ye find it, me boy?"

"Ah!" said Fitzgerald, still pointing the finger in his

father's face, "a queer place, Governor, to be finding it. Will I tell you where?"

"Do so, Fitzy," answered old Roche.

"On Richenda!" said Fitzgerald.

Old Roche started, then wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Ah, go on, Fitzjur'ld, you're too fond o' coddin'——'

"Divvle a cod," cried Fitzy fiercely. "I'm telling you, Governor, on Richenda's hand!"

The old man stared, then shifted ground, looking intensely miserable. "Well, what a queer place to be findin' it, Fitzy——"

"Wasn't it, Governor?"

"But sure, I s'pose, 'twas no harm; maybe your mother left it after her—on the table, an' on account of her trusting Richenda——"

"Bah!" cried Fitzgerald furiously. "*Trust!*"

"Well, but, me boy, listen here to me——"

"Listen to *me*," cried Fitzy; "the game's up, Governor; make your mind easy about that. When I take things into my hands, I make things hum. And the first thing I take into my hands to-morrow is to pack that—that schemer, that designer—that——"

"Come, come, Fitzy, I can't allow those words," cried the old man, getting warm, and waving his hand. "I'll not have a word said against the girl; there's no harm in the girl. I can't permit that language of a lady——"

"*Lady!*" shouted his son. "Well, I tell you what

that one is: your choice specimen, your credit to the Imperial, your skilled waitress, your trusted servant, your confidante of Duchesses! She's a thief, that's what she is, a common thief!"

The old man looked almost beside himself. "Fitzjur'ld—Fitzjur'ld!" he cried, "why, this is abusive language, sir—slander—scurrilous abuse——"

"Scurrilous fiddlesticks! I call a thief a thief," said Fitzgerald. "Why the woman made a clean breast of it. Confessed to me."

His father's jaw dropped. "*What?*"

Fitzgerald watched him calmly. "That she meant to steal it, for one thing," he answered, watching him.

"'Tisn't true, me boy," old Roche cried. "I'll not stand here and have it said against her by herself or anybody—no, not if it's me own son sayin' it. Why, what else could the poor child say,—on account o' your findin' her with the ring!—she'd be hard put to it to explain——"

"She was—a bit," said Fitzy. "It's an awkward situation, Governor."

"Will I tell you, Fitzjur'ld, what way she came by the ring?"

"Ay, do so, Governor," answered the son.

"I—I gave it her!" said old Roche.

Fitzgerald fell back against the wall. "Well, *that's* a good 'un," he said; "the best yet!"

"Ask her yourself," said his father.

"True, or not true, there's something strange about

that," repeated Fitzgerald. "What the divvle d'you want giving rings to a waitress in your own hotel?"

"Ah, sure, what harm's in a bit of a ring!"

"What harm," repeated Fitzgerald, "is in giving a servant wench a ring o' the same pattern you put on the hand o' my *mother*, when you got engaged to her?"

The old man dropped his head. "Ay, Fitzy, it seems a bit queer," he muttered.

"*Seems!*" said Fitzgerald, starting up. "I'll—I'll——"

"Fitzjur'ld!" exclaimed the old man with intensity, "ye'll not tell the mother?"

Fitzgerald cast a look of scorn at the miserable old figure. "D'ye think I'd soil me mother with that kind o' story! No! But I tell you what I'll do. To-morrow off she goes! D'ye hear me, Governor?" He threatened the old man in his face. "And she gets her marching-orders from you."

"Why, no, me boy, I can't do that—I couldn't turn the girl away. Hush! some one's comin'——"

"Only a housemaid—but we want no scenes," said Fitzy. "We want no rumours of your—of your—gallantry getting round to me mother's ears. Here—go!" He pushed old Roche away. "Leave the whole thing to me: I'll settle it, and her. Bah!" He ground his teeth, and measured his father up and down. "It makes me sick! An old man, a decent old man I used to think, and a—bah!"

As the housemaid, who had heard high words, appeared, looking from one to the other, with her eyes wide

open, Mr. Roche, throwing out hands of despair, made for the staircase, with a desperate exclamation.

Fitzgerald turned the key in his mother's door.

"*Now*," he said, inside the room, with the door open. "Listening to every word, I'll bet!"

She nodded, speechless with tears. The tears of women made Fitzgerald Roche uneasy. Richenda took his hand in her small fingers, and looked up in his face. "The poor old dear!" she said appealingly, through tears in her throat.

"Poor old dear!" said Fitzy.

"He was good to me," she said, still holding to his hand; "don't—don't be hard on him."

Fitzgerald sneered in her face.

"I—I don't care what you think," said Richenda, throwing back a defiant, tear-stained face.

"I guess you'd better not," he answered.

He held out the ring to her. "You heard what me father said?"

"Yes—I did."

"He gave you the ring?"

"The ring *is* mine," she answered.

"The evasion's plain," he sneered.

Richenda drew a little nearer. "You're sending me away?"

"That's putting it too gently: no, I'm packing you off — to-morrow — double-quick time, before the whole place knows."

Her eyes grew wide with fear; then she spoke softly: "They won't hear of it!"

"Won't they?" he said with menace.

Richenda shook her head, and said more softly still, "You'll never tell them!"

"Shan't I?"

"You've a good, kind heart," the girl murmured. She was actually stroking his cheek.

"I have, have I?"

"Though you don't know you have. And you'll never —never tell." The voice grew softer and softer. "Yes?" she whispered.

"H'm—if I'm to be as good and kind as that——"

"Word of honour?"

"You doubt my word of honour," said Fitzgerald, turning quickly.

"*No*," she whispered.

"Well—what am *I* to get?" said Fitzy.

Richenda touched his cheek with her fresh lips.

"This!" she said. Fitzgerald moved away, hardening his heart again. As he moved, Richenda held out a pair of pitiful little palms.

"Then I *must* go—to-morrow?"

Fitzy hesitated. "Well, in a—in a few days you must," said Fitzy.

. . . . . .

In the meantime Mrs. Vandravarte received on every hand the flattering blandishments of her own set. Things would settle themselves, she had observed to Moira, before the dance began, with regard to how she would avoid the copious attentions of Mrs. Roche's "lot," once that the

introductions had been well got over. Before Mrs. Roche's face, as she brought up her friends, Mrs. Vandravarte produced the camel smile to each in turn, and so soon as Mrs. Roche had gone, snuffed out their advances with a firm finger and thumb. With her daughter there was a pre-arranged agreement, by which, on being invited by any of the "Roche lot" to dance, Miss Vandravarte was "so sorry, but her programme was quite full."

Safely surrounded, now, by her own set, the Roche guests safely distanced, Mrs. Vandravarte was told that her dance was being an enormous success. To which Mrs. Vandravarte most naturally replied—she was only too charmed that every one enjoyed themselves. So sweet of her (said one lady) to relieve the monotony of the Dublin season, by anything at once so simple, so original, and yet so lavish. Mrs. Vandravarte replied to this: since they thought it worth their while to come so far to be so kind, she was indeed amply repaid for all her trouble. And these—Roches—said another, these—ah—quite new people, to whom Mrs. Vandravarte seemed to have taken such a—but rather, was it surely not, the other way?—that they had fastened on to *her?* That these—ah—people, staying, she supposed, in the same hotel? . . .

"My dear child," said Mrs. Vandravarte to her interlocutor of fifty, in a giggling whisper, "what *is* one to do! It's bad enough, if people of that kind come and plant themselves down beside one in an hotel—but when they're living there already, and the hotel belongs to them, what *then?*"

Oh, of course, the confidential member of Mrs. Vandravarte's own set had said, now it was all quite clear! How kind—but oh, how very awkward for poor dear Mrs. Vandravarte! More confidential giggling between the two. So good of Mrs. Vandravarte to let them in, simply because her own good taste forbore to do what anybody else would certainly have done—to shut them out of the Imperial Hotel and the Imperial dance.

Of course, they had been obliging, Mrs. Vandravarte admitted: simply turned the place upside down for her and Moira. But then, naturally (with many nods), it was not done for nothing. Nothing in this world was. The mother, an extremely pushing person, who would stick at nothing to worm her way amongst the county people, had noticed how extremely intimate they were with Sir Anthony Amersham, who happened to be staying at the Imperial before they came. And, of course, those sort of people would give everything they possessed, to be able to boast that they numbered a Sir Somebody, or a Sir Anybody, or a Sir Nobody, among their acquaintance. Poor Sir Anthony—such a perfectly delightful man!—too well-bred, of course, to be deliberately crushing to that kind of person,—had given them every hint that he did not choose to be dragged into their arrangements. Useless—perfectly useless! They pursued him everywhere. Literally ran him down, wherever the poor dear man turned. So inexpressively vulgar, but then, that sort of person never *had* any perception. The daughter, Asphodel, they called her, Mrs. Vandravarte supposed

to be peculiar—was a terribly forward and ill-behaved girl, and said the most atrocious things, out loud. No delicacy—absolutely none at all. She had waited till the very last moment before the dance began, to see what Moira meant to wear, and then actually put on the same colour, the same ornaments even (only, of course, hers were bought, Moira's in the family)—in order that she might be taken for Moira's sister, or have it said they always dressed alike.

For this last piece of astonishing impertinence, Mrs. Vandravarte received the outpoured sympathy of her whole set. So simply horrid for her; so commonising for poor dear Moira! But then, one consolation was, that nobody but a Roche could entertain for one moment the possibility of being taken for a Vandravarte. As a matter of fact, though that kind of person never could be brought to see it, it only made the distinction between a Roche and Vandravate the more complete.

Encouraged by the warmth of their condolence, Mrs. Vandravarte proceeded to recount what a—creature Solomon Roche was. However Mrs. Roche *could!* A person who had made his money, by no means an inconsiderable amount, in that kind of horrid—*quid*, she thought that it was called, that common men rolled in their palms and then chewed, and—well, to put it plainly—spat. How rather amusing the situation was, of everybody knowing exactly what tobacco Mr. Roche was always using, and the implied obligation every one was under never to

enquire what brand he used. Mrs. Roche—or Mrs. Twist, as she called her—(much laughter) would have a fit, supposing she knew that Mrs. Vandravarte knew how they had made their money. Here Mrs. Vandravarte, elated by the Roches' supper, to which she had done full-bodied justice, attempted a thumb-nail sketch of Mrs. Roche, which (although her whole set assured her, she had missed her bent in not having gone upon the stage) turned out to be a full-length portrait of Mrs. Norman Vandravarte herself, recognised by all except the painter.

At this point she broke off short, as Solomon Roche, limp, dejected, despairing, and discarded, came forlornly into the room, and looked round for a consoling smile where he might fly for refuge. During his circuit of the guests' faces, he came upon the camel-smile of Mrs. Vandravarte, which appeared in order to accompany her remark, "Extr'ordin'ry creature!" as she drew the attention of her set to him.

He wandered straight towards her, fixing expectant eyes upon her face. Mrs. Vandravarte's set made way for him, as a crowd makes way for an approaching curiosity. Her eyes seemed to magnetise Mr. Roche. He addressed himself solely, and somewhat violently, to her.

"'Tis a queer thing, isn't it, when the family a father has raised, turns against him; wouldn't you say that?"

"Very strange!" the set, or parts of it, humorously concurred. They opened their eyes at each other.

Mr. Roche, transported by his grievance, saw nothing beyond it.

"When the son you have reared would raise his hand to his father! Something wrong about that, eh?"

"Something *quite* wrong, Mr. Roche," the set agreed, with a pleasing sense of *double-entendre*.

"But with some of us," continued Mr. Roche, conceiving he had found a reciprocal nature in Mrs. Vandravarte, "it counts for nothin' that a man has worked hard all his life, an' raised himself from bein' a 'prentice——"

"*Wonderful*, I'm sure!"

"To be foreman, an' manager, an' then boss o' the whole show. 'Stead of bein' proud to talk of how he did for himself an' fam'ly, the one thing they are thinkin', is how to be hidin' it, an' makin' game o' the old man."

"Oh, no, Mr. Roche, don't say *that!*"

"'Tis true for me!" cried Mr. Roche. "The most popular part o' the old man is his back, I'm tellin' you—the back that carried the burden, to be sparin' them doin' a hand's turn at all."

"You've something to be proud of, Mr. Roche!"

"On'y for Roche's Twist," he cried, "where would they be, with their fine dresses and gold ornaments!"

"Where indeed!" echoed the Vandravarte set. They began to find old Roche immensely entertaining. Particularly Mrs. Vandravarte, who discovered in this trustful blabbing of the old man behind his wife's back, a revenge

upon her for permitting Asphodel to wear a dress of the same colour as her daughter's.

"On'y for Roche's Impeeryal Hotel," he continued, "where would they be to-night!—for all they make game o' the place! Supposin' old Solly was to die to-morrow?"

"Oh, please, Mr. Roche, don't talk about dying, so soon after supper——"

"Where would they find themselves *then*?" he demanded.

The set agreed amongst each other with expressive eyebrows: "In the workhouse—probably"; but they encouraged the old man to continue.

"Every pennypiece laid out upon this 'rekerky' dance, as they call it, to-night, comes out of Roche's Twist," he added. "An' proud I am of it."

The camel-smile of Mrs. Vandravarte withdrew hastily. She made a gesture as if to adjourn her court. "Every *penny* spent to-night," he cried, "comes out of the old man's pocket——"

He ceased abruptly: his wife was pouncing down on him. Old Roche winked at the Vandravarte set. "*Now* we've done it!" he said.

While Mrs. Roche hastened, as her constructive genius warned her, to the rescue of her reputation, Mrs. Vandravarte exclaimed, with purple cheeks, "Oh, Mrs. Roche, your husband has been *so* amusing!"

"I wouldn't be surprised!" his wife replied. As she dragged Mr. Roche off in her wake, the Vandravarte set heard her exclaim, "Well, of all the old *fools!*—"

"Screamingly funny, wasn't he, poor dear!" observed the set, dimly uncomfortable for Mrs. Vandravarte: "as good as a play. Too irresistibly quaint——"

"Too irresistibly *drunk*, you mean," said Mrs. Vandravarte with venom.

XVII

THE day after the dance at the Imperial those denizens of the hotel, susceptible, like Birkie, to mental atmosphere, became aware of what she would have called a psychic sultriness hanging like a pall about the place. Distinctly palpable it was, although Sir Anthony, the Roches, and the Vandravartes were supposed to be sleeping off the results of their exertion in their beds. At eleven o'clock, upon her way to the bath-room for corporeal refreshment, Mrs. Roche had encountered Mrs. Vandravarte in the corridor—each girt magnificently about their portly waists with the bell-rope girdles peculiar to flannel dressing-gowns—each sternly twisted up in top-knots as to hair, and padding silently in woollen slippers. Mrs. Vandravarte had bowed to Mrs. Roche, as, with her characteristic gesture, she had pushed past. Mrs. Roche had made her inclination, as, the habit of her upbringing reasserting itself, she made way for Mrs. Vandravarte.

In the heart of Mrs. Vandravarte black mistrust had left from its precarious reign a sediment of doubt, as to whether Mr. Roche might not have been "put up" to his naïve declarations of the night before, that placed her in such a

dubious light before her choicest friends. She did not, in her most remote and honest regions, really believe this to be so, but it had left her most uncomfortable. This discomfort showed itself, therefore, in her face, allied to the first origin of her displeasure—Asphodel's copying of her daughter's dress—while, in the vanguard, lurked a sour intention to insinuate by marked disapproval, that Mr. Roche had certainly been drunk, to behave as he had done.

The cause of Mrs. Roche's dignity lay in her knowledge of the grounds of Mrs. Vandravarte's complaint and an obstinate determination to dispute the head and front of these offences. Nor could she, with all her deliberate diplomacy of overlooking much unpleasantness, be blinded to the rudeness which Mrs. Vandravarte had shown her friends; the way in which she had girdled herself with her own set for their protection from the onslaughts of the Roches. Her dignity was augmented by an uncertainty, stronger than that which Mrs. Vandravarte experienced, as to how much, or what exactly, her husband had been saying, beyond that, undoubtedly, he had talked of Roche's Twist. Pre-eminent, however, was her consciousness of great expense entailed, of numberless concessions made, pills swallowed, to find herself rewarded in this manner, and her son no further with Miss Vandravarte.

Glimpses which the family had caught of Fitzgerald showed him to be of a forbidding temper, strangely at variance with his usual good-humoured foolery. Mr. Roche wore an air which could not conceal his

consciousness of being generally out of favour. Altogether, the temper of the household, seeing what had been done for its entertainment, was most ungrateful; until, at eleven o'clock, tea and Richenda came.

With Richenda there entered into every room an immediate impression of well-being. If the girl had been the obliging confidential servant before, she was now the intuitive but entirely respectful personal attendant of everyone. Her desire to please would have been touching, had it not been accompanied by an evident assurance that she was leaving undone nothing which was wanting to their comfort. With her eyes on Asphodel she had quietly remarked, that Miss Roche was very much overdone—as who could help it, who had been obliged to divide several dances!—and must on no account stir from her bed till night. Would Miss Roche forgive her, but as she lay upon her pillows, her likeness to the Duchess, under similar conditions, had been enough to make her exclaim almost at it. Black rings beneath Miss Roche's eyes—which were so clearly defined, by reason of her delicate skin—suited Miss Roche's eyes, and made them, if possible, even larger than they usually were. She drew down the blind beneath the level of Asphodel's tired eyes, put pillows behind her back, as she set down the breakfast-tray, and re-arranged the crumpled quilt. Had Miss Roche heard whom they were saying was the beauty of the night? But no, Richenda supposed, this would not meet Miss *Roche's* ears.

Into Mrs. Roche's bedroom Richenda carried a bouquet

of fragrant flowers. Her eyes upon the hostess of last night, she asked her pardon for her forwardness in suggesting, that she was utterly exhausted after the pains and vitality she had not spared, in order that nobody should feel left out. *Some* people, said Richenda, never thought about themselves at all. There were not wanting those, she continued, as she sprinkled scent on Mrs. Roche's nightgown and pillow (which was a thing, she said, her Grace always requested to be done), who remarked that of the two hostesses, one was the sleeping partner, and the other the life and soul of the whole night. She commented, excusing herself for the liberty she took, on the unpleasantness of Miss Vandravarte choosing the same colour as Miss Roche. But there, however much you tried, you could not take the wind out of some people's sails, and it was observed, that the bare fact of Miss Vandravarte wearing another blue gown had served the critics as a demonstration of the kind of lady who could wear turquoise, and the kind who never should. Here Richenda could not refrain from remarking to Miss Roche's mother of the curious resemblance, at times, of the young lady to the Duchess.

She left Mrs. Roche, *en route* for Birkie, more and more under the impression what an astonishing piece of good fortune the drifting of Richenda into the Imperial harbour had been. At the same time she had said to Asphodel, "If I didn't believe in that girl as I do—she was *so* obliging—I would say that she was wanting to get something out of me."

Certainly, though the Imperial party had split up, yet did one common bond of union remain to them —Richenda!

Thus meditated Mrs. Roche, as she began to get into her petticoats in preparation for dinner. Out of the gratitude of her heart, the waitress had chosen to bring breakfast to her employers, since (she had said) she knew that one liked some one quiet and accustomed about one, when one was slack and indisposed. But, towards evening, her duties in the coffee-room restrained the hand of her obligingness, and the housemaid took her proper place in the rooms upstairs. When Bridget came with hot water to Mrs. Roche, she was aware of a searching sniffiness in the woman's air, which caused Mrs. Roche to wish she had a handkerchief, at first, but finally to conclude that Bridget desired to disburden herself of some pungent observation.

"What's the matter, Bridget?" Mrs. Roche said in rapid testiness. "If you've got something to say to me, you'd better say it. I don't believe in a servant having a grievance. Grievances aren't very pleasant at the best o' times, and servants alone in these days are enough to break your heart; but a grievance joined *to* a servant is a thing I never will allow——"

"Is it grievances, ma'am!" began Bridget.

"If you've any fault to find, Bridget, you'd better find it, and be done with it."

"I've no fault, ma'am, to find with Miss Ashydell, an' the small little one," said Bridget, "an' sure the

whole of us is cracked about the Masther an' poor Misther Fitzy—ah, sure there's no harm at all in poor Misther *Fitzy!* An' Miss Birkett's very qui'te——" She wrung out an unpleasant rag with which she was wiping Mrs. Roche's basin, and added, "No, madam, I've no complaint agin' the *fam'ly.*"

At this point Mrs. Roche began to hope, that her complaint might be against the Vandravartes, and to look forward to an opportunity when she might take that form of satisfying but cheap revenge upon them, which lies in wholesale discussion with a servant.

"But 'twould be as much as me character's worth to be stoppin' in a place that'd be the like o' this, oh, r'aly 'twould," continued Bridget. "Ye're innocent, ma'am, God bless you," she went on; "r'ale ladies don't be noticin' what's goin' on under their nose——"

"Now, Bridget," said Mrs. Roche, turning round to face the servant, "if there's one thing I can stand less than any kind of commonness, it's people having a mystery. If there's anything going on under my nose, as you call it, I ought to know of it."

"Is it anything?" exclaimed Bridget, throwing up her hands; "the saints preserve us, if ever I seen the like o' the goings on!—but spake up, I won't——"

"Come now, have you anything against your fellow-servants, Bridget?" enquired Mrs. Roche, determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

"Ignorant, poor servant that I am," said Bridget, "I was always admired for me table-manners, an' me

handlin' of me fork an' knife was never called in question before this—an' to be told I turns her stomach sick with cuttin' me bloater with a knife, I never will, not if she was to be the Lord Leftinant's lady—so I won't. An' to see her rise up, an' carry off her plate to the panthry—'atin her dinner off the shelf, sooner'n be lowerin' herself with dinin' among a lot o' dirty Irish haythens—an' holdin' up her skirts when she comes down to the kitchen—'Bridget, what's this horrid smell?'" (Bridget's feelings found sarcastic vent in a mincing English accent.) "'Why don't you sweep up all this dirt?' risin' her petticoats, to be sittin' on the chairs that I runs over every morning with a cloth."

"Who in the name of fortune are you talking about——"

"That's the *best* of her," Bridget shouted, "an' if she don't go, I will—with her Duchesses an' glycerine on her hands, an' askin' for a private room all to herself, an' makin' eyes, an' her caps that's specially got up for her—that one's a divvle, mind you, that *Richenda!*"

Mrs. Roche was aghast. "Richenda! I'll have nothing said against her. Richenda may have faults, but she's a good servant. I'm very well satisfied with Richenda."

"That's the way of it, now," Bridget cried in great excitement; "she comes around ye all—th'angels of heaven couldn't match her upstairs, but the divvles o' hell'd be hard set to it to beat her down. Where did she come from, will ye tell me, ma'am?"

"We can't say, Bridget," contended Mrs. Roche in

wavering dignity, "that's no concern of ours—but I'm sure Richenda came from a respectable place——"

"Respectable ash pit!" replied Bridget. "Where's her character? Where does she go at night—too grand as she is to sleep here?"

"That's jealousy," responded Mrs. Roche, re-gathering her forces; "it's disagreeable in a lady, but it's not to be put up with in a servant."

"Jealous, is it!" exclaimed Bridget. "I'd rather me papers, than her sweethearts, anny day. My character'll bear inspection, annyway, which is more than hers will, I'll take me oath. If she'd keep to her *own class*, 'twouldn't be so bad, but——" She broke off short. "I'm sparin' you, ma'am, on account o' you bein' that innocent." She took up her pail, and prepared to leave the room. Mrs. Roche waited a second at this point, to see if more were forthcoming from the woman. Finding that nothing was, she concluded, waving her hand in dismissal—

"There's one thing about me that's well known to all the registry-offices in town, Bridget; and that is, it's no use bringing tales to me, for I don't *listen* to them, so there's an end of it."

"Sure don't I know that, Mrs. Roche?" said Bridget. "But what I'm sayin' is this: 'tis betther to be cute and warned, Mrs. Roche, than innocent and put upon."

Hearing steps along the passage, she retreated hastily, and muttering, to Miss Birkett's room, leaving Mrs. Roche dimly disquieted.

"It's nothing but spite, I don't believe a word of it," she declared to herself, "whatever it may be."

At the same time, with the uncomfortable and apparent irrelevance of instinct, her own words to Asphodel on Richenda's peculiar attentiveness that morning came perforce into her mind: "If I didn't believe in that girl as I do—she was *so* obliging—I would say that she was trying to come round me." Was it possible that affairs in the kitchen had come to an unpleasant head; the servants risen against Richenda, and the girl, aware of her precarious position, trying by hypocrisy to inveigle herself into the favour of her deceived employers? She dismissed the thought as out of keeping with her experience of the girl, until the hints of Bridget with regard to sweethearts returned to rankle in her. There was no harm in sweethearts, she argued to herself; sweethearts were all very well in their proper place, and not to be avoided with a girl of Richenda's prepossessingness. But "*out* of her own class" —Bridget had begun to say—did that imply—she hoped that Bridget did not mean Sir Anthony! Then her maternal heart quickened with a swift alarm—no, far more likely, that Fitzgerald, who, as his sister said, could not stand five minutes of a lady's company, had been larking with the waitress. "*Impossible!*" exclaimed Mrs. Roche with such decisive force, that she snapped her petticoat-string. So terribly vulgar! Ruin all their chances! What *would* Mrs. Vandravarte say—look! In her imagination she saw the camel-smile . . . It must be put a stop

to! Heaven preserve, said Mrs. Roche, in pious pity of herself, the path of that poor woman rising into the serene air of the best set in Dublin, weighted on one hand by Roche's Twist, and on the other, by a son with a propensity for governesses and housemaids. Acting on a sudden impulse of irritation, she put her hand on the bell, and rang for Richenda.

XVIII

WHEN Richenda came into the room, Mrs. Roche, perceiving her through the glass, was disarmed by the expression of reliable self-confidence on Richenda's face, and became a little agitated at having rung for her.

"You sent for me, madam," the girl said.

Mrs. Roche pressed herself abruptly into the attack: "I've been hearing the most dreadful stories about you, Richenda, from the servants, and as I can't have that sort of thing going on in my house——"

After a tense pause of a moment: "What sort of thing, madam, do you charge me with?" the girl asked respectfully, but firmly. Mrs. Roche thought that she had grown pale.

"My good girl, I shouldn't dream of repeating them to you. A person can't be too careful. Besides, how can I be expected to remember half a servant says? A servant talks such a lot of nonsense, and gets so excited. Besides, I never listen to tale-bearing from a servant. I make a point of it. I stopped her immediately. You never know what it mayn't lead to. Now, Richenda, what defence have you to make?"

Richenda hesitated again: then she said, with the same firmness—

"I hope you will pardon me, madam, for making so free, but I would put it to you as a lady, whom I believe to have a lady's sense of justice, how can I defend myself, when I don't know on which side I'm going to be attacked?"

Mrs. Roche could not avoid feeling that this was very nicely put. However, she continued hastily; "I can't be bothered, Richenda, going into all those little details: I deal with things, people, money, everything in the mass."

"Pardon me, madam," said Richenda, with unflinching eyes on Mrs. Roche, "I cannot be disposed of in the mass. And do you call 'hearing the most dreadful stories' about a young woman's character a little detail?"

"It should be sufficient for you, Richenda," went on Mrs. Roche, a little flurried, "that your mistress tells you that they are *said*, Richenda, no matter what they are."

"Madam," intervened Richenda steadily, "I have nobody to protect me but myself, and it is not sufficient for me."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Roche, "there's a superiority in your manner that a servant won't stand: I never did believe in servants setting themselves up."

"I would just put one question to you, madam. Her Grace has complimented me upon my manners. Would you have me alter them?"

"I have no fault to find with your manners," Mrs. Roche answered, rather irritably. "Your manners are all very well and nice for upstairs, Richenda, but downstairs——"

"I am to be one person with you, madam, and another with my fellow-servants?"

"No, I'm not implying that you need be a hypocrite. A white sepulchre is a thing I can't abide," replied Mrs. Roche, feeling, with discomfort, that the girl was getting the better of her.

"If my manners, madam, upstairs and down, are of a piece—at least that would not point to a charge of deceitfulness against me?"

"No; I never said that, Richenda, or implied it."

Richenda drew herself up to her full height. "I cannot help being superior to—Bridget! You were very well pleased with my superiority, madam, when I came. You say you do not wish my manner altered; you do not want me to be one thing to your faces, another to your backs. I *am* superior," Richenda said. "Who could possibly doubt my obvious superiority!"

Mrs. Roche turned round to stare this incomprehensible piece of impudence out of countenance. "Well, of all the——" she murmured. But it was useless! What Richenda said, although she should not say it, was, after all, profoundly true. Richenda was—in short, she *was* so superior!

"Well, but, madam," she said, returning to the point; "these dreadful stories about me!"

"You are too much on the tapis, Richenda, to catch me up," Mrs. Roche said, shaking her head. She felt uncomfortable about this word, and turned, almost involuntarily, to Richenda. "Isn't that the word?" she said uneasily.

"*Qui vive*, madam, is more usual, I believe," Richenda answered.

"Have it whatever way you like," Mrs. Roche said, flushing, "it makes no difference whatever to what I was saying. A girl, Richenda, in your position, with young men about the place, can't be too careful."

"I could not be more careful, madam, if I tried."

"You must bear in mind, we've treated you with every consideration, and reposed every confidence in you. You wouldn't get the consideration at another place, that you've had here. You must remember, Richenda"—she turned and glanced at the girl—"we took you without a character."

"Yes, madam, I do remember, and you remember why!"

Mrs. Roche recalled the notorious affair of the Duchess, and hurried on.

"And then, they tell me you set yourself up to want a private sitting-room."

"I have resigned that claim," Richenda said; "it was only, because I have no quiet place to write my correspondence in, as her Grace used to allow me. I could not be expected to write my letters at the kitchen table where they chop the onions."

"Perhaps not, Richenda, we can't all be like her Grace, you know. But come now, you used the words 'dirty Irish heathens' in connection with the servants in Mr. Roche's employ. Don't you know that you could be had up for defamatory language? You used those words?"

Richenda looking steadily at Mrs. Roche, smiled a slow, broad smile of disdain.

"Do you believe, madam, all a *servant* says?" she asked, with a curled lip. Mrs. Roche could not refrain from smiling.

"You amuse me, Richenda! Why should I credit you with a word of truth?" she observed, "and what, pray, are *you*?"

"In these times, madam," said Richenda, after a little pause, "the classes have become so involved, it's difficult to know for certain what anybody is!"

Mrs. Roche was sufficiently impressed by this remark to feel slightly ill at ease. But she went on directly: "It's said, Richenda, that you have sweethearts." As she said this, she faced the girl deliberately.

"I see no infamy in sweethearts, madam," said Richenda. "I should be proud, not ashamed, to acknowledge mine, if I had one. You may safely question every man, or every gentleman in the Imperial upon that head, if it's implied that I have sweethearts here."

As she spoke, she leant forward, where she stood, before the window, looking with some eagerness through it.

"Richenda, when I speak to people, I believe in people listening to me. It's very bad manners in a servant—looking through the window when I speak."

Richenda rectified her position at once. "I beg your pardon, madam. It was only, speaking of sweethearts——" She stopped short.

"Well, what of them?" enquired Mrs. Roche.

"It was only—I saw young Mr. Roche down there, going for a stroll with Miss Vandravarte," Richenda said.

"Quite possible they might be—where was it?" said Fitzy's mother, striving to impart a callousness to her voice, which at that moment it was rather obstinate of receiving.

"But to return to our point," she said with a re-invigorated air. "I believe in not leaving a point, unless you can't help it. It's no harm to have warned you about your conduct; I'm simply taking your word for it that your conduct's been as it should be. But if I have, or hear, any just ground of complaint against your conduct again——"

"Madam," the girl addressed her, "does it come to this? You are dissatisfied with my services, and seeking for an excuse to get rid of me?"

"I never said that, Richenda—you're too quick to take offence."

"Because, madam, if that's so, Mrs. Vandravarte has been speaking to me——"

Mrs. Roche's constructive organ effected a lightning change of costume. Oh, she had, had she! it exclaimed

to Mrs. Roche. Dissatisfying Richenda! Getting her to go to Mrs. Vandravarte, where Richenda, as soon as she was settled, would, in a spirit of vindictiveness at being dismissed from the Imperial, report what Mrs. Roche had said to Richenda of Mrs. Vandravarte; reveal the delicate machinery of the Roche social system; scheme for the success of Moira with Sir Anthony, instead of Asphodel, and poison the august well from which Mrs. Roche had begun to draw the waters of distinction.

"Don't mind her," said Mrs. Roche, facing swiftly round upon Richenda. "She's a—she's a very well-bred woman, Richenda, far too much so to be guilty of such a common, dirty trick, as trying to draw a servant away from a place where they're — where she's very well satisfied. Here," Mrs. Roche ended, putting her hand in her pocket, "is something you can buy a little keepsake with."

Richenda put her hands behind her back, refusing with such proud dignity, that Mrs. Roche brushed past her in some offence, as she went downstairs, saying to herself, "She's come around me. I don't believe her. I don't believe a word Richenda says."

Extremely late, and too much embarrassed in her manner to make excuses that cohered at all, pale, her eyes pointed from some late dismay, Miss Birkett seated herself at table between Fitzgerald and his sister. Her whole figure seemed to recoil upon itself and towards Asphodel, in an instinctive shrinking from Fitzgerald. "I will not doubt!" Birkie reiterated through soup and

fish, "I will not doubt." But as her mind dinned this formula into Miss Birkett, Miss Birkett's heart was flooded with a vast mistrust. Her mind varied the formula, as the meal progressed, to "Man is but frail, man is but frail." But the heart of Miss Birkett refused consolation.

It was a poor pretence of conviviality that the party was keeping up. There existed, for one thing, the implied dissension between Mrs. Roche and Mrs. Vandravarte. Old Roche was in disgrace. Fitzgerald was foreboding and profound. Asphodel laboured under a conviction that Sir Anthony was disillusionised by the metamorphosis her looks had gone through in one night. Moira had climbed upon the high horse that her mother invited her to share. The soul of Birkie, which had been a slender thread to string illusions on, was stripped of all its pearls. As for Sir Anthony, he looked morosely round on the whole table, and he, like Birkie, repeated a formula to himself: "I am a failure; you are a failure, we are all failures. The whole world has failed."

On the first appearance of Richenda after Birkie's entrance, Miss Birkett fixed delving eyes upon the girl, and drew her breath hard, her eyes glittering, while the waitress drew near to Fitzgerald Roche. Richenda felt her gaze, and set her cool eyes on Miss Birkett's face. Birkie stared back.

"I see you; I'm watching you. Oh, I know you!" said Miss Birkett's eyes.

"You are perfectly welcome, Miss Birkett," replied Richenda's, "to see, to watch me, and to know me."

Towards the conclusion of the meal, old Mr. Roche, reaching across the table in obtrusive penitence, to hand his wife some fruit, caught his cuff in one of the four flower vases, and brought it heavily down.

"Just like father!" Asphodel had observed.

"So stupid!" said Mrs. Roche.

"No harm in water," said the old man, "that I've ever heard of, to table-cloths or men. Now if 'twas a drop o' the craythur, 'twould be different."

"It would indeed," said Mrs. Vandravarte. "I had just been admiring their arrangement."

"Clematis, and old man's beard, and clusters of grapes! It's been reminding me of Lazarus and Dives. Purple and fine linen! Singularly Imperial," said Sir Anthony. He turned to Asphodel. "You did it?"

"Oh, dear me, no, Sir Anthony, the waitress," her mother answered.

"Extr'ordin'ry!" said Mrs. Vandravarte; "the girl has taste."

Sir Anthony woke up suddenly, and seemed to find a relish in the world. "Curious creature!" he said across the table to Birkie. "Reminds me of a piece of old Dutch china in a curiosity shop."

In the meantime Richenda had glided amongst them, and with a flick or two, had removed the vase, absorbed the water, and re-arranged the table.

"I suppose we're the curiosities, Sir Ranthony," commented old Roche, with a chuckle.

"She is certainly a rare piece," said Sir Anthony.

"Not to be picked up every day," said Fitzy, looking at his father.

"Show to better advantage laid by on the shelf," added Mrs. Roche, looking sidewise at her son.

"Not to be dropped, I suppose," said Birkie in sinister tones.

Old Mr. Roche was nodding vehemently at Amersham. "You have it now; she *is* a rare piece, Sir Ranthony," he said.

Mrs. Roche became aware that Richenda was behind her, at a little distance.

"If you ask *me*," said Asphodel, though nobody had, "Richenda's a perfect marvel. She makes me feel quite ignorant!" Her mother kicked her beneath the table, to indicate Richenda's nearness. "I believe there's nothing that girl can't do. She can do manicuring and hair-dressing and table decoration and—and——"

"Dancing!" said Birkie, looking Richenda's way, "and she can change her voice!"

"She can," replied Sir Anthony with interest. "I have noticed that."

"So have I," said Fitzy, "now you mention it."

"A better waitress," exclaimed Mr. Roche warmly, "I wouldn't wish to see, joined to the most amiable and—and culchured manners."

"I've never seen Mr. Roche so warm before," Mrs. Roche said in an aside, giggling, to Birkie.

"It's a warm night, mater," said Fitzy.

"The girl is quick," Sir Anthony said indolently.

"She can pick up anything," said Fitzy, with his eye upon his father.

"It's mimicry," said Birkie.

"In fact," said Moira Vandravarte, with her usual trick of turning down her lips, "she seems to be what is called by people of a certain class, 'a treasure.'"

"That's exactly what Richenda *is*," said Mrs. Roche with point, her eyes on Moira's mother. "And what's more, I know Richenda's value—and I don't intend to *part* with Richenda."

"Very well said, Mrs. Roche," replied her husband, uncertain of the liberty he took in speaking with such confidence. The party rose to leave the room. In the doorway, holding it open for them, stood Richenda.

"Thank you, madam," she whispered, with her eyes down, as Mrs. Roche swept past.

XIX

FOR the next few days Miss Birkett felt that her heart against her ribs might be compared to a heap of burning coals confined in a brazier. She found no relief for the emotions smouldering steadily within her. When dinner was over, the night after the dance, she had gone to her room, intending to pace there with clenched fists, to find Richenda humming pleasantly, as she pulled down Miss Birkett's blinds, and re-made her agitated bed.

Her features set with the pale dauntlessness of innocence betrayed, Birkie had faced the waitress for one minute in apparent calm, while the imprisoned words "Intrigue, treachery, dishonour, shamelessness!" sought for freedom at the door of her lips.

"Do you remember," Richenda had said with roguish reminiscence, "that pleasant evening after dinner that you and I had, Miss Birkett? When we confided our little grievances to each other—and you told me—you remember what! You weren't very happy—you were packing, I think. And I danced before you, like Salome before Herod, and dispersed your clouds."

"Schemer, double-dealer, traitress!" replied the eyes of Birkie to Richenda. But her lips were dumb. She

was in Richenda's power; she dared not speak against her, lest Richenda should revenge herself—as she would not hesitate to do—by reporting to Mrs. Roche the gist of their disaffected conversation on the night that she alluded to. Miss Birkett could not remember now what she had said exactly to Richenda. But her allusion brought back the sensation of bitterness, of insurrection and deep-seated grievance, in which the irritations of that day had reached their culmination. Her heart was black against the Roches then, therefore Birkie was certain that her words had been. She had been unwise, unwary, she was well aware.

Richenda's eyes, as they looked at her, had no clemency in them: they held the merciless delight seen in a cat's eyes, as it pushes to and fro, for its amusement, the sparrow it has killed, half irritated by its powerlessness, and contemptuous that it can play no more.

Birkie had no doubt, moreover, that the kind of woman that this was, would weave the implied understanding as to Fitzgerald Roche between them, into a tale of Miss Birkett's designing which would end in her dismissal. No, Birkie knew a good post, when she was enjoying it; and seventy pounds for the tuition of a child of seven, allied with handsome presents, frequent holidays, and much society, was not the kind of situation that one met with every day. Fear of Richenda had crept into her eyes: Richenda saw it, and rejoiced, despising her. A look of sparkling triumph came into those sea-blue eyes, as Birkie, baited, became Birkie baffled—Birkie beaten.

Nevertheless, Miss Birkett found occasion to drop now and then a little seed of aspersion against Richenda into Asphodel Roche's mind. Without saying more, she would merely warn her against Richenda! Asphodel had better be upon her guard, when certain people were about. People she didn't like the looks of—that were not all they seemed. To leave no letters (Birkie called them "documents") about; to be careful how she spoke, to keep her eyes open; not to err in the young girl's direction of over-trustfulness. To Mrs. Roche she would speak of Richenda, with drawn breath, as that "invaluable person," and so the euphemistic snowball of Richenda's reputation gathered force by rolling, until it became of critical dimensions.

Miss Birkett's dislike and apprehension of the waitress had reached such a pitch that, whenever she could manage it, and Richenda came into the room, Miss Birkett left it. The chief cause of her hatred, Birkie was partially aware, lay in her self-contempt at feeling fear for her. And yet, she could not master it.

A few days after her discovery of the girl's duplicity, Miss Birkett found herself alone one evening in the big drawing-room, while outside, mooning to and fro before the window, Sir Anthony was smoking a prodigiously long pipe. Richenda had been into the room to see if Mrs. Roche was there, and left again. Miss Birkett raised the sash, and stepped outside the window.

"Oh, I'm so glad she's gone," said Birkie, drawing a mysterious breath.

"Ah—who?" he asked.

She shuddered.

"That girl! Richenda!"

He raised his brows. "Indeed, Miss Birkett?"

"She gives me the shudders," Birkie began by way of prologue. "*Frisson*, the French word, is nearer, though. When she passes me, something goes down my back."

"Curious!" said Amersham; "down mine too."

"Yes? Sir Anthony, you reciprocate the feeling?" she said excitedly. She put her hand over her heart. "Sometimes I feel, if I don't speak," said Birkie, looking round her, "to somebody, in whom I can confide——"

"Your nature, Miss Birkett," Amersham said with an assurance which seemed born of long deliberation; "*must* confide and be confided in. It craves, your nature does, for confidence."

Birkie turned her startled eyes upon him. "You're right, Sir Anthony," she said, momentously, "however you found it out! You keep your eyes open"—he made a disallowing movement of the hand and shoulder. "We're both observant,—you and I—about the only people, it strikes me, in this place that *are!* If somebody," continued Birkie, "kept their eyes open—rather more, it might be better for them. Somebody would see!"

"Another aspect of you—is your extraordinary sense of mystery, Miss Birkett," Sir Anthony replied. "I think I scarcely ever met a woman in whom the sense of the unusual is more strongly developed than in you."

"Right again," said Birkie, breathing hard. "Sir Anthony, you should go in for palmistry. When first Richenda came into the place, my sense of the unusual, as you call it—was most strongly roused."

"Ah! You must tell me your impressions," he said.

"I knew," she answered, "that *there*—was no common servant-girl."

He nodded, lifting his brows. "Extr'ordin'ry! as Mrs. Vandravarte would say."

"Later on, my impressions," continued Birkie, "have been confirmed, Sir Anthony. Bit by bit, I have begun to piece my theory out. My theory is, that Richenda, as she calls herself—has—well, come here for some purpose. Some purpose best known to herself."

Sir Anthony, against his own desire and inclination, began to feel slightly disturbed.

"Insinuated herself into some people's good graces," went on Birkie, "to her own ends, Sir Anthony. What *I* don't like about her is, that she exercises some uncanny power over the house. The Imperial, Sir Anthony," she said, turning to him, "was one thing before Richenda came to it, and another since she's come. Surely you've noticed——"

"I have noticed, certainly," said Amersham rather cuttingly, "the removal of some pink paper parachutes, which adorned all the fire-grates; that the window-sashes are not longer propped by sink-brushes."

Miss Birkett was too much excited to notice how very rude this was. "No, but the influence she exerts over

some members of the house!" she went on, crimsoning angrily at her thoughts. "An influence which is not, Sir Anthony, for *good*——"

He smiled.

"Characters—I know," Miss Birkett said, "unspoiled, unspotted by the world—well, they've changed, Sir Anthony—certain people have." She turned on him suddenly. "Where does that girl go at night?" she demanded.

Slowly, painfully, Amersham felt himself grow scarlet. "I—I—how should *I* know, Miss Birkett," he said, facing her, "where she goes?"

"Ah!" answered Birkie, "but some people do. Some people, in my opinion, know a good deal more about Richenda than some people know."

"I—really think you must be mistaken, Miss Birkett," said Amersham, with an accent of extraordinary reasonableness.

"I am *not* mistaken," said Miss Birkett, bringing down her hands on either side of her dress with a loud clap. "I have heard, on very good, the *best* authority, of certain people, we won't say who—persons entirely unsuspected——"

"Oh, quite," said Amersham weakly.

"Persons of position, and supposed good taste—yes, you may protest," cried Birkie, almost wildly, "but it can brook concealment no longer—are more interested in Richenda than they care to say; than, Sir Anthony, is generally known!"

"I am sure," said Amersham, "no guile, Miss Birkett, was intended."

"Then why go and kiss her," said Birkie fiercely, "when everybody was carefully out of the way?"

"Perhaps he didn't know they were," replied Sir Anthony in distressed tones, "or else, I'm sure, Miss Birkett, he would never do it.—"

Miss Birkett turned a look of infinite scathing on him: "*If* they were?" she said.

"One of those little mistakes then——" he continued waveringly.

"Which are apt to recur," she answered, sneering, "unless somebody speaks to his mother."

He started. "Supposing he had had the misfortune to have lost her good influence, while he was yet a boy!"

"Bah!" said Miss Birkett, "we're working at cross purposes. He might be sorry now, if his good mother were to die, for having so deceived her, for, fool though they always put him down to be, she never doubted Fitzgerald's sense of honour, his integrity."

"*Fitzgerald!*" said Sir Anthony.

"For all your powers of observation," Birkie said in her warmth, "you were some time getting to *that*, Sir Anthony."

"I take it," Amersham said, beginning to walk about, "that this—this information was not first-hand intelligence?"

"I don't look through keyholes!" Birkie blazed out, with sinister nostrils.

"No true woman does," he said. "Then, might not your informant——"

She shook her head obstinately. "Absolutely reliable."

"Have—have—might it not have been a question of mistaken identity? Men's clothes, their—their customs in such cases are, I believe, so much alike. Supposing it were dark?"

"The electric light was on," Miss Birkett cried passionately.

"How very indiscreet!" he murmured. "There's no Birking it?"

"My informants had their facts quite clear. When I tell you the words they overheard, you may think, perhaps, a little bit *too* clear. She made him promise solemnly, 'never, never to tell, upon his word of honour.' Oh, when I think," exclaimed Miss Birkett, "of the vast possibilities which that nature held—all, all blighted——"

"There are certain flowers in the vegetable world," said Sir Anthony, still walking, "which look like blights, but are in reality perfectly developed blossoms."

"You would insinuate——" said Birkie, drawing herself proudly up.

"Insinuations, Miss Birkett," said Sir Anthony, rattling off his words with great rapidity, as he walked up and down, "are for those people who have nothing definite to imply—who, like the writers of allegory, speak what they don't understand, to give another man the pleasure of fancying he does. When a woman talks of miscarried possibilities in a man, she means the possibilities *she* con-

ceived for him: which could never have been even probabilities with him. In the avoidance of which, he baffles, certainly, the improbabilities she planned for him, but as certainly fulfils the projected possibilities of his original Designer."

"You mean, Sir Anthony," said Miss Birkett, "to imply —to—to *say* that the influence of a trusting woman——"

"Believe me, Miss Birkett," Amersham exclaimed, "there is no influence more pernicious to the well-intentioned man than the influence of a trusting woman. There's no temptation more insidious than the temptation of being trusted. Trust, in the hands of most men, is like a toy, which has been described as unbreakable to him, in the hands of an inventive child. That child will never rest till he has hit on some ingenious method of destruction, to prove with tears how he has been deceived by fables of its indestructibility. The true philosophy of life is in a firm acceptance of the untrustworthiness of everyone, based on realisation of the utter unreliability of oneself. You see before you, Miss Birkett," Amersham explained, partly, but only partly, enjoying himself, "to return confidence with confidence—a man of good intentions."

Birkie remarked that this fact was patent.

"Whose life," he continued, "has been wrecked by the persistent and uncalled-for efforts of certain persons to make him the basket to carry all their eggs. It can't be done, at least, by one man. That's why I am so many."

The eyes of Birkie had regained their normal expression of fascinated alarm.

"Oh, I am weary," said Sir Anthony, "of being labelled 'this way up with care,' of carrying so much fragility." He turned to her. "Some day there's bound to be a smash, Miss Birkett. I believe the smash is coming."

"Then what, Sir Anthony, of all those eggs?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered; "but at least the yoke will be broken. Miss Birkett, this is between ourselves?"

"And no other!" responded Miss Birkett with feeling, "and my suspicions—my unshared doubt——?"

"'"'Tis in my memory locked,'" he answered, sighing; "'"and you yourself shall keep the key of it.'"

XX

DURING the next few days that followed on his encounter with Miss Birkett, Sir Anthony wrote a good many letters to his Godmother. He was much interested in the tone of them himself, because he never wrote a private letter at all, unless for the purpose, as he put it, of spitting out a bad taste in his mouth. Analytically, therefore, his letters to his Godmother held a double interest for Amersham. For himself, he examined them with curiosity, as the settled sediment of whatever cloudy discontent had been floating on the surface of his mind, unclassified. For her, he had to consider what exact chemical action they would have upon the surface of her mind. Biographically, he felt that they were of peculiar interest—they marked the stages which a man goes through in arriving at a prescience of doom. He spoke to her at one time of leaving the Imperial—he scarcely knew for what reason. From that he proceeded to say, that he was sure the climate did not suit him, for his spirits were so exceedingly unequal, and his appetite but languid. The third stage of his discontent was marked by an allusion to a sensation of fullness somewhere, and extreme irritability which

went far to prove that the food was not nourishing him. Again, Amersham complained of a feeling of perpetual impending dissatisfaction, the seat of which he could not place precisely. He would jump, he told his Godmother, at the least sudden movement, as though he were expecting—he could not say what. His work was suffering from an inability to fix his mind. Strange fancies seized him. Sometimes his abstractions transported him for several minutes to higher planes, during which his subconscious faculty was racked by fear of interruption. When a rapid descent from elevated atmosphere would give him much the same electric shock that is suffered by a medium, who is suddenly awaked.

Personally, he believed that the psychic atmosphere of the Imperial was impregnated with plebeianism. It was extremely difficult for rarified spirits to rise above its fumes, and the effort needed was exhausting to those of the finest make. The wall-paper, the very mattresses of his bed, were heavily soaked with it. It kept him awake at night, and lay in heavy dreams upon his chest.

The absences, abstractions, and irritations of Amersham did not escape the observation of the Imperial Hotel. They felt that Amersham would not be long with them; that the Imperial had disappointed him. Amersham, on the contrary, rather keenly felt the disappointment of the Imperial in him. He felt that it was saying, "Sir Anthony has fallen flat." He did not mind inflicting disappointment in the way of wounding epigram, triumphant rivalry, startling rudeness or pecu-

liarity, but to inflict a disappointment by falling flat was more than he could bear. To meet the disappointment of their disillusionment, he had to sustain a reputation of unpleasantness with himself. This ended in the mortifying discovery of the thinness of the ranks of his allies. Seeing this, Sir Anthony began to dread an eruption of some stupendous effort of his vanity, that would land him in a conquest from which there would be no possible escape. At this period he floated drearily about the place, his unfinished picture underneath his arm, as pretext for his abstraction and unpleasantness, too proud to solicit the attentions he repelled, too vain to live in happiness without them.

One morning he came down to an early breakfast, for which no one but himself had risen, carrying the picture with him. He entered with his head extremely high, casting the sour looks of autocracy on Richenda and the waiter. Unfortunately, since neither servant seemed to have observed his entrance, his acrid looks rebounded on himself. Casting his long eyes on Richenda, Amersham told himself that she had commonised—like the Dublin buns, the poet he had discovered—since her discovery by some one else. She was not interesting, he said, glancing again at her; she had lost the crispness which was one of her charms—probably, the only charm she had. He left his breakfast untouched upon his plate, and glanced to see how this must be affecting her. Richenda, Sir Anthony observed to himself, was now no more crisp to him than a Covent Garden cabbage

of the day before yesterday. With her hands before her, she gazed out of the window.

"Abominable inattentive servants!" Amersham said half-aloud. He tried to catch Richenda's eye, but failed. Finally he raised his voice. "Waitress!" he said in tones of haughty feebleness. "You do not see"—he pointed to his plate—"that I don't touch my food. I cannot eat."

She came with obvious unwillingness towards him.

"Thought you'd left it, sir," Richenda said, without concern.

"Thought I'd left it?" he said irritably. "If I had, you must have known I'd left it for some reason."

"Some fault to find with it?" she said, lifting his plate from the table. "Get you anything else?"

He stared at her a moment before he spoke.

"*That*," said Amersham almost passionately, "is not the way to speak to *me*. *Take* away that plate!" He waved an angry arm at her. "Your manner," he said, with a stiff chin, "is anything but what it ought to be. Your waiting has gone off. One might—one might *starve*—before one could get you to look one's way."

"Sorry, sir," Richenda answered, with a languid smile.

"I looked at you three times," he continued, "before I could attract your notice." He drew himself up. "I am not accustomed to such treatment. You are not at my elbow, at my beck and call." He drew himself up in his chair. "Do you remember who I am?" he said.

Richenda paused, lifted the corner of her lip, and strolled away. Amersham's breath was gone. He clenched his fists under the table. "Insolence!" he exclaimed aloud. He looked at her when he had said it. Richenda had not quailed. In his pride and anger he even fancied that a humorous smile flickered about the corner of her lips. A minute passed. She was not coming back.

"*Waitress!*" said Amersham. She strolled back to him. "What are you *doing?* Why don't you bring me something?"

Richenda stared coldly. "I thought you said, sir, that you couldn't eat."

"I said," he answered, maddened by her manner, "I could not touch *that* food—it was uneatable." His voice trailed off into a mournful echo of itself. He supported his head with one hand. "Something!" he murmured, "quick! Can you not see—that I am almost *faint* for food?"

Richenda smiled, but went away for fish. When she returned, she commented more amiably upon the picture.

"Why you've not finished those feet yet!"

"Ah, no," he answered.

"Pull the grass up higher round 'em, couldn't you, sir?" she suggested, with a movement to suit her words, "like a rug."

"Those feet, as you call them, never will be finished here," Sir Anthony replied. "The fact is, I am leaving the Imperial Hotel." He frowned in his endeavour to preserve

an unruffled and incurious brow, as he let this bomb-shell fall. He chose to fancy that he heard Richenda start, and to imagine faint resentment in her indifferent query of—

"Soon, sir?"

"Almost immediately," he replied with relish. "The fact is—I—" his voice dropped mournfully, "my health is suffering—I—I am not very well."

"Surfeit of Roches, sir?" she hazarded.

Because her reply pleased Amersham a good deal more than at this moment he desired, he paused, and bit his lip to convey correction to the girl, but in reality to restrain the wilful meanderings of a smile.

"I have a great deal to complain of in the Imperial Hotel," he said. "In my—present state of health I require a far more close attention than I get."

"Isn't your state of health," she said, "much what it always is?"

He did not care about the tone of this remark. He continued:—

"I have no one to anticipate my every want: I have not," he raised his chin, and frowned, "by any means the consideration I require——"

"No, sir," she answered languidly. "I don't suppose you have."

"The consideration I have a right to expect. Nor do I care for the atmosphere or tone of the Imperial Hotel. There's a lack of feeling for the—the just claims of others. A sense of vulgar scheming and offensive intrigue." He

looked haughtily about him, and glanced side-long at the girl.

"Why, there! in some ways the Imperial *is* horrid, sir," she said. "I'm sure what I've been through——"

He looked up sharply, as she broke off. "Through what?"

"What would a gentleman in your position know of the dangers that a girl in mine goes through?" Richenda answered, pleating a napkin. She looked about her, shrugged her shoulders, and added in an undertone, "Believe it was some one in the Imperial, too!"

"Believe who—what?" he said, with a vague disquietude in him.

"Followed me home, one night, he did," Richenda whispered. "Chased me up and down, and nearly scared the life out o' me."

"No—no wonder," said Sir Anthony.

"Must have been a horrid cad, sir," said Richenda, looking up at him for sympathy, "mustn't he?"

"Oh, a *horrid* cad!" Amersham agreed.

"No true gentleman," said the girl, "would do a thing like that."

"Certainly not, Richenda," said Sir Anthony.

She raised her head with a gust of passion. "The mean, dirty little bounder!" said Richenda.

Amersham rose up, and pushed his chair and plate away.

"Pray spare me the out-pouring of your unsavoury confidences, my good girl," he said. He was crimson

with passion, but he controlled himself enough to drift with his usual langour from the room. When he was safely outside the coffee-room, he shook with passion, his hands trembled. There was one thing for which Amersham would not forgive his mother on her death-bed: the recollection of an aspect of himself upon which some ludicrous construction could be put. Contemporaneously, he could not help remembering the episode beneath the window of Miss Roche's bedroom, in which, again, his conduct had miscarried of its full effect.

But, at a pinch, these trifles could be obliterated; they belonged to the past Sir Anthony, and were no part whatever of the present. Sir Anthony had now a far more urgent trouble. He sat down in the smoke-room to consider it. Something had gone wrong with him. The very servants did not notice him. He had lost point, lost grip, impressiveness. He carried weight with nobody: Amersham thought that he must be extremely ill. That she should *dare* not to observe him when he could not eat! . . . The door was open—he heard the rustle of crisp skirts go past; he ran to the door, pale with a sense of impotence.

"Do you dare to insinuate—I *can't* draw feet!" he cried, trembling with anger, through the door.

But Richenda was already at the far end of the passage. He looked towards her down it.

"Did you call, sir?" she said from the end of the passage.

"No, woman, *no!*" he answered and he banged the door. Inside the room, he ground the palm of one hand into the other, prickling all over from a sense of foolishness.

"Had me *again!*" he muttered.

XXI

WITH a smile upon his lips, Amersham perceived from his position on the hillside, which overlooked the harbour, a fluttering line of ladies' dresses growing more and more distinct, as they wound up the grass pathway from the town.

Far below him the sea lay between the hills. From where he was it looked concave to Sir Anthony, and almost royal-blue; it reminded him of a girl's blue pinafore spread on bushes to dry. At his feet the gorse went round the hillside in a flaming ring; the scent of it in the air overcame the scent of the sea.

And now he could distinguish the separate voices of the approaching company. Before he went down the hillside, to meet his guests, he straightened himself, while his lips set doggedly, and his eyes flashed. It was the gesture of a man who tightens up his nerves for supreme effort. With all the desperate vanity of a boy, he was bidding for the popular esteem which lately he had seemed so near to losing. He was racing for the Imperial Cup, which he had carried off so easily before. He had staked all he had upon his own self-confidence, which had never yet missed an event.

Amersham looked down at the ring of yellow gorse, and it typified for him the glory which he meant to win back, the flame of the incense which should be burnt before him. They would all look to him, turn to him, centre round him, as they had done before. Self-confidence had had a nasty crossing, and he, the owner, had become a little frightened lest her form should be upset, but she was picking up already, and would romp in an easy winner. He moved forward. They were coming up the hillside single file.

"Such an uncommon notion, Sir Anthony," said Mrs. Roche, coming towards him, "to give a gorse-party. But then nothing that you do is common."

"*I* don't know where you get your ideas from—extr'ordin'ry!" exclaimed Mrs. Vandravarte.

"The audacity of it takes me," said Asphodel.

"Look at him," said Moira; "he's wearing a gorse-coloured tie!"

"A n'emblem, I s'pose," said old Roche, "of the flame consuming him within."

"Oh, what rubbish you talk, Solly!" said his wife.

"Very daring," said Birkie, "for any one but Sir Anthony."

They were all standing on a level with him, by now; to this running fire of excited comment, he replied by taking off his hat to all, and by shaking hands separately with each.

"I wish you'd tell me how you get your ideas," said Mrs. Vandravarte again; she clung on to Sir Anthony's

hand and showed all her teeth in a fond smile at him. "Where do they *come* from? They don't come to *me!*"

"What's the idea of it—a gorse-party?" said Moira.

"What does it *mean?*" said Asphodel, looking coquettishly at him.

"I thought of it," replied Sir Anthony, his whole being revived, expanded, and restored by the re-awakening of popular esteem, "for its decorativeness and glory, its perfume, for the piquancy of its insinuations." He hesitated, and fixed his eyes on a china-blue blot coming up the hillside pathway, "And so that I might wear this tie," he ended with childish naïveté. "Do you like this tie?" he said, turning to all of them. There was a reassuring chorus of—

"Very uncommon!"

"Extr'ordin'ry!"

"Most audacious!"

"Highly becoming!"

"I wasn't aware Sir Ranthony was a n'Orange man!"

Amersham sighed with satisfaction. "Oh, I'm so pleased you like it," he said. "I was afraid you might not."

At this moment, they all turned and stared. At a little distance behind Sir Anthony stood Richenda, gowned in a shade of blue, which looked as if it must be a dress-length from the sea. She wore a rosette of gorse-blossom in her cap, and a piece of it in her waist.

"The esoteric meaning of the gorse-blossom seems

startlingly typified in the figure of Richenda!" observed Fitzgerald slowly. He had not spoken up to now.

"So I think," Birkie breathed through her nostrils. Sir Anthony looked at Fitzgerald out of the corners of his eyes. He addressed the girl with arrogance. "Richenda, lay the table; you know where it's to be!"

"*Is* there a meaning?" enquired Asphodel, with eyes of infant innocence.

"Don't be a fool, Asp," said Fitzy.

"Did you never hear o' the sayin' about kissin' bein' out o' favour when gorse is out o' bloom?" old Roche said, chuckling.

"No, but I'll bet *you* have," said his wife. Fitzgerald turned, and looked at his mother shrewdly.

"Oh, father, don't be so vulgar!" exclaimed Asphodel.

"Mr. Roche always remembers anything common about kissing," observed his wife to the company in general.

Fitzgerald quickly turned his eyes upon his father from his mother.

"Solly's blushing," cried out Mrs. Roche. "I think it's time, at his age, to leave off."

"No, but," said Asphodel, with a genuinely puzzled brow, "gorse never *is* out of bloom, Sir Anthony, is it? At least I know," she ended hastily, feeling the penetration of Miss Vandravarte's scornful gaze, "I've found a bit in winter, *many* a time."

"You would!" said Fitzgerald.

Miss Vandravarte burst out laughing.

Amersham, who had planned out this entertainment

with a view to the quips it would engender, and the general feeling of pleasant venturesomeness which it would suggest, murmured to Miss Birkett, in an aside, that he was quite enchanted with the way in which his guests had taken to the notion.

"The reason for its success," he said to her, "is the same reason which constitutes the long run of a successful play: it's a hackneyed notion in a brilliant disguise."

"That's the reason—of gorse!" old Roche said in an undertone, with a frightened eye upon his wife.

"That's the last straw!" she exclaimed. "I don't mind a joke in season, if it's some one else's, and it's good, and I don't mind a joke if it's mine, and it's not particularly good; but if it's my husband that makes it, and it's particularly *bad*——"

"Let's go and have some food," said Amersham. "I do so hope that you can all eat strawberries——"

There was a general outcry of surprise.

"Strawberries at the end of May!"

"Extravagant man!"

"Where will you end your days!"

They scrambled over the hilltop to where lunch was laid upon the other side; the candid light of greed shone from everybody's eyes.

"Charming spot you've chosen, Sir Anthony," said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"I chose it for the flowers," he answered.

"I adaw flars," responded Mrs. Vandravarte, crushing

the bird's-foot trefoil, thyme and wild violets, which were sprinkled over the hillside, with firm flat feet.

"One sees that at a glance," he answered, with a look of sympathy.

Luncheon was laid in a happy dimple of the ground which was sprigged all over with wild flowers, surrounded by little boulders that served the company as seats, and illuminated by the torches of the gorse. Upon successive rungs of oysters, champagne, aspics, and strawberries, Sir Anthony felt himself, with a gratefully swelled heart, climbing steadily back to his position as little god of the Imperial Hotel. He caused Richenda to circle ceaselessly amongst the guests, and spared her not—exultant in his power over her. He was paying out Richenda, for her inattentive callousness of late to him. He wielded her mercilessly, as a slavish instrument. Richenda, he observed sardonically, obeyed him with a meek servility, which was more than probably the outcome of her time-serving perception that Sir Anthony held the governmental reins once more. The growing impression of the inhabitants of the Imperial that Richenda was less ruled than ruler there, had not escaped Sir Anthony. He would give both ruled and ruler an illustration of the tyrant overthrown. A lust of tyranny sprang up in him. He gave Richenda one champagne bottle after another to uncork; he watched her with cruel satisfaction, while her colour deepened unbecomingly, while her chest rose, in answer to the muscular demand entailed by some specially obstinate cork. She

had never done with cutting bread and fowl, and portioning lobster out. At length the gall of old Roche rose.

"'Twould be the greatest charity," he observed with heroic fortitude, seeing his alarm of Mrs. Roche's eye, "for some one to give th' unfortunate poor creature a hand."

"Oh, Richenda's as strong as a horse, Mr. Roche," Sir Anthony answered, with a cruel curl of the nostrils, as Richenda, at a little distance, struggled with her eighth or ninth cork. "Besides, you can't hurt a woman. The more Richenda's sweated, the better Richenda's suited."

"No, you can't hurt them," Mrs. Vandravarte agreed.

"Well, I'll not stand and see her sweated, anyway, Sir Ranthony!" exclaimed old Roche: he sprang to his feet, as he spoke.

"And I'll not stand and see you make a fool of yourself, Solly," answered his wife.

"Father gets softer every day," commented Asphodel.

Fitzgerald, meanwhile, who had been expecting this development, waited with a grim chin to see what would happen.

"'Tis a shame," muttered the old man, "for three fellows like us to be watchin' a lady do the work——"

"*Lady!*" exclaimed Mrs. Roche and Asphodel together.

"I really believe it's softening of the brain," continued Asphodel, nodding her head.

At this point old Roche walked off, casting looks

of bursting reproach on the whole party. Fitzgerald rose and intervened.

"Look here, Governor," he said, with a stiff lip, "leave this job to me." They reached Richenda's side at the same moment. Fitzgerald took the corkscrew from her, and old Roche the bottle.

"Will you look at the *two* of them—ridiculous!" Mrs. Roche screamed after them. "All for a servant!"

Sir Anthony got up, and came towards them quickly over the grass. He laid his hand upon the corkscrew in Fitzgerald's hand.

"Allow me, Mr. Roche," he said disagreeably, "if you think it necessary to spare Richenda."

"I think it necessary," Fitzgerald blazed out at him, "to spare me mother a scene."

"I would say," old Roche said hotly, "'twas extremely necessary to spare oneself bein' shamed."

Amersham flushed hotly.

"I'm tired of drawing your old bottles," said Richenda suddenly, under her breath, to Amersham, looking straight to Fitzgerald as her redeemer. "Draw 'em yourself!"

"Will you remember, woman," he cried, drawing himself up, "whom you are speaking to!"

"Oh, come, Sir Ranthony," retorted old Roche, "the girl's in me employ, when all's said and done."

"Then you should teach her manners, Mr. Roche," said Amersham. He strolled back to his guests with flashing eyes.

"And I'll—I'll not have her abused nor ill-treated."

"Here, shut your head, Governor," said Fitzgerald, digging him in the ribs.

"I'll not!" his father blazed out suddenly. "I've shut me head too many times, Fitzjur'ld, on too many subjects, I'm tellin' you. I've shut me head about the Impeeryal, and about Roche's Twist, an' I've shut me head while I'm the laughin' stock o' the place. I've shut me head while your mother calls me a fool, an' your sister says I'm soft. I've shut it about—about——"

Richenda's face coloured over suddenly. She laid her hand upon his arm. "Hush!" she said under her breath. He turned excitedly to her.

"My advice to you, Governor," said Fitzgerald, "is this: keep it shut a little longer."

"Well," old Roche returned, as a parting shot. "If me fam'ly turns around on me, an' me own son makes game o' me, I've *one* place to go——"

"Where's that?" said Fitzy.

"Richenda!" old Roche roared at him.

XXII

MEANTIME the Imperial party, split up again, had wandered off in disaffected and suspecting groups.

Amersham, whose blood was heated by Richenda's insolence, old Roche's interference, and the avowed interest of Fitzgerald, found himself separated from the rest of the company with Moira Vandravarte. He had walked some way in silence with her, unbroken by Miss Vandravarte, who was neither observant of surroundings nor possessed of wit, when her atmosphere of resentful consciousness penetrated his abstraction.

"Ah! What were we saying?" he exclaimed.

"Absolutely nothing I believe," said Moira, with a scornful dip in her bow mouth.

"Shall I tell you why?" said Amersham with desperate suddenness.

"Yes."

"I was thinking about your hair!"

The situation was saved.

"My hair?" she said.

"Take off your hat," he said, irresistibly.

She obeyed, saying "Why?" as she did so.

"I want to watch the bees mistake it for a clump of gorse."

"Gracious!" she answered, blushing, "I hope they *won't*."

"And if they do," he answered, "I shall be there."

The lace upon her dress was agitated. For a minute neither spoke. His temper had been roused by the scene between Richenda and the men, and when his blood was up, he could make it the motive power to drive headlong which passion he might choose.

"Miss Vandravarte," he said suddenly, "you may not think it, but I am a disappointed man."

She shrugged her shoulders; her invariable empty gesture.

"Disappointing of you! What's done it?"

"Women, Miss Vandravarte," said Amersham.

"They're such fools," she said contemptuously, "aren't they?"

"They are," he said, "*most* women! They have nothing to say, have they—most women?"

"Absolutely nothing in the world," she answered.

"It's a marvel," he said, "isn't it, how most men stand most women."

Her lips curved still more in scornfulness, as she replied, "I'm sure, if *I* was a man, the ordinary girls one meets would simply bore me to te-ahs."

"The ordinary girl," he answered, lured by her intuition to sit up straight, and look into her eyes with the candour of sudden reciprocity, "does bore, even the

ordinary man, to tears, Miss Vandravarte. Then how do you think the ordinary girl affects the extraordinary man?".

She turned and looked at him with scornfully narrowed eyes, and the bow mouth down-turned.

"That's just what *I'd* like to know," she answered. "How he simply stands her at all—absolutely for one single moment!"

It was plain that she alluded to Asphodel Roche.

"They have no depths," he answered, plucking up tufts of wild thyme.

"They don't even *think!*" said Moira.

"The contempt!" exclaimed Sir Anthony, "of the entirely ordinary woman for everything in all the world, except for what is in itself contemptible!"

"I wouldn't mind," she said, "if they weren't so jealous of each other——"

"Asphodel Roche isn't jealous," he said.

She flushed suddenly. "Oh, you think not?"

"But then, she's charming, so why should she be?"

She laughed contemptuously. "Oh, if you call vulgarity a charm—*most* charming, Sir Anthony!"

"There's no more irresistible attraction, for most men, Miss Vandravarte, than vulgarity in a pretty woman."

"I'm sorry for most men, then."

"So am I," he answered, "but there it is. It's the rather neurotic attraction of faint repulsion: the fascination of an ugly scar in a beautiful face, the sensational fascination of slight shock. It's like laying hold of an

electric battery—with the same temptation—to see how much one can stand.—"

"Till one can stand no more, I should think," she commented, her youth reproducing curiously, in one facial flash, the stamped aspect of her mother's countenance.

"I've reached that point already, Miss Vandravarte," he said. "It doesn't take me long to reach it—with most women." A look of relief had crossed her face.

"The insolence of the ordinary woman beats *me*," she said.

"Does it?" he answered. "Then her abominable selfishness!"

"Still, I don't know, Sir Anthony," she answered. "I know a girl who was simply fearfully in love with a man, who simply hadn't one absolute penny—absolutely. I mean he was fearfully poor. And there was another man very fond of her, fearfully rich, who'd simply give her every mortal thing she wanted. She'd only to lift her little finger. And she gave up the first man, the poor man, though she absolutely adored him, because she thought it was her duty to marry the other man. I think it was simply splendid of her."

"Absolutely splendid," he said. "Hard luck, poor girl!—she must have simply adored the chap without the money! Miss Vandravarte, I want to meet a woman like that—a strong, determined woman, who would sacrifice absolutely everything, to do her duty in that state of life to which Providence knew so well what it was

doing in calling her. The kind of heroic woman who would not even shrink from offering up her love upon the stern altar of her set. The kind of splendid woman who would stick at nothing, to achieve what, in her soul of souls, she knows to be doing the best that she can do for herself. The kind of woman who can say—nothing, yet look unutterable things. Beautiful in her superb arrogance. Hiding beneath an aspect of transparency, an aspect even of a creature without thought—depths no man would ever plumb. Miss Vandravarte," he took her hand, "dare I say that I believe that I have found that woman!"

She shrank back from Amersham, bewildered by his manner.

"How should I know," she tried to say with the old contempt, "if you have found her?"

"But *I* know it," he rejoined, "and *you* know it, in your heart you do." He leaned forward, drawing her towards him by the hand.

Moira Vandravarte started, and coloured hotly. "Hush! don't!—there!—I knew something would interrupt us," she said.

"What—who is it?"

"Didn't you see her—*I* did!"

"See whom?"

"That horrid Richenda."

Amersham exclaimed.

"I wish they'd get rid of her!" exclaimed Miss Vandravarte with baffled venom.

Sir Anthony rose, with an appearance of interruptedness. "That is one more," he said.

"One more what?"

"Disappointment."

She did not dare to ask him, in whom or what he was disappointed. "Won't things ever be the same again?" she asked angrily.

"Quite impossible," said Amersham. "Things never are."

While Moira and Sir Anthony drew near to one another, Asphodel Roche, far from satisfied with her society, had been rambling irritably with Mrs. Vandravarte and her mother. Richenda, they understood, was packing up the hampers, Mr. Roche looking for butterflies. Birkie, with Marcus Aurelius in her hand, played with Fitzgerald at a kind of mystic hide-and-seek, upon the outskirts of a miniature pine-forest.

Birkie would see him prowling on tip-toe through the densest bushes.

The white face of Fitzgerald peered at Birkie round the trunk of some great tree.

Birkie deep in Marcus Aurelius.

Fitzgerald disappeared.

Telepathy between Birkie and Aurelius broken.

Fitzgerald cracking twigs somewhere else.

Bond between Birkie and Aurelius re-cemented.

Fitzgerald emerging, with Red Indian tread.

Meeting of Marcus, Fitzgerald, and Miss Birkett.

Rupture between Fitzgerald, Birkie, and Aurelius.

And so on.

"Have no fear, Fitzgerald!" Miss Birkett addressed the faltering image of Fitzgerald in her soul, and sat down to await his positive coming.

Fitzgerald, however, had no thought of fear, or Miss Birkett. Fitzgerald had heard voices — voices that he knew. He was going to locate the voices. At length he drew near to the spot. Somebody was sobbing; Fitzgerald got behind an outspreading pine. The voice that sobbed said something indistinct with sobs. And then Fitzgerald overheard—

"What is it, pet?"

"A—*all* men are bad."

"Oh, come now, me child, you wouldn't call me every way bad?"

"Ah—no—not every way——"

"Come now, didn't I stand by you?"

"Y-yes—I hate them all."

"Didn't I stand up for you?"

At this moment Fitzgerald, flying from the spot, emitted a loud cat-call of warning.

"What's that?" he heard the sobbing voice exclaim.

"A'nowl, I s'pose."

"I can locate that owl!" exclaimed Fitzgerald in extreme bitterness. He bit the finger at his lips in meditation, as he strolled back through the wood.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," said a gentle voice. He looked down, and beheld Miss Birkett, sitting on the stump of an old tree that was strewn with fungi.

"Birkie, get up," he said, with the abstracted authority of one remote with lofty dreams. "You're sitting on a fungus: it'll make a custard on your dress."

She rose at once: and it was sweet to Birkie to obey.

"Birkie," continued Fitzy, unaware of the liberty his innocent tongue was taking, "do you see anything strange in my manner?"

"Mr. Fitzgerald, I've noticed it for some time."

"Am I—different in me manner towards you—to what I used to be!"

"I think I've noticed it," said Birkie.

"I've something on me mind," said Fitzy, seating himself upon the fungus, off which he had ordered Miss Birkett.

"Oh, Mr. Fitzgerald, if you'd only throw it off," she said.

"What'd I tell you?" said Fitzgerald; "that you're not to call me that!" He plucked a fungus, and plunged an abstracted thumb into its yellow mustard. He wiped the thumb upon the leg of his trousers.

"Miss Birkett," he began again, "if women only knew what men were like."

"If men," returned Birkie, breathless by now, "only knew what women *could* be like."

Fitzgerald snorted bitterly. "By George!" he answered; "don't men know!"

"If men would only trust in them a little more," said Birkie, letting the generous forgiveness in her heart well up a little at his evident contrition.

"A little *less* you mean!" he answered with a stern, forbidding note.

"Oh, Mr. Fitzy," she said, "if a man truly repents——"

"Repents his grandmother!" said Fitzgerald.

"Don't, don't let bitterness flood your heart; it's never too late for a man to mend his ways."

"Depends a bit," said Fitzy, "on the age of the man, you know."

"After all, what is one slip!" she hazarded, with her bashful face averted.

"If it was only one," he answered bitterly.

Birkie's eyes widened with horror; still, bravely knitting her hands together, she continued, "If it were even one or two—need a man despair?"

"Judging from appearances, decidedly not," said Fitzy.

"It—it can be lived down," Birkie said in louder tones, "if—if——"

"If he wants to live it down," said Fitzy.

"Oh, Mr. Fitzgerald," she said again, "sometimes I think, we women are not kind enough."

"Now and again," said Fitzy, "it occurs to. me——"

"Or—or brave enough."

"They're such beastly cowards," he answered. "Such sneaks!"

"No—no," said Birkie, "don't miscall the woman."

"Why on earth shouldn't I?" he demanded. "She's ruined me home. Why don't she go and make a clean breast of it to somebody, and have done with it."

"And—and what about *you*, Mr. Fitzy," Birkie said, laying a mother's hand upon his shoulder. "Why don't *you* have it out with some one?"

He turned and looked at her. "I! I—daren't!"

"Come, play the man," Miss Birkett urged, with a swelling heart.

"I couldn't split on a woman," said Fitzy. "Besides—I'm afraid for me poor mother——"

"Don't be afraid of your good mother, Mr. Fitzy. I know her heart—she will be merciful."

Fitzy grinned. "Will she!" he said.

"Mr. Fitzy," she began, with maidenly hesitation in her voice. "Will you try and remember something?"

"Try," said Fitzy, "but my memory's not up to much."

"I—don't believe," said Birkie, with averted face, "personally I'm not one of those that think a man can be so far lost that the influence of a—a good woman——"

"Produce the witness," said Fitzy.

"Can—can yet save him," Birkie struggled on, "if he won't doubt."

"Extremely doubtful if he won't."

"Man is but weak," said Birkie.

"I'm with you there," said Fitzy.

"I am well aware: men can be tried too far." She turned round with sudden valour. "There—there is *one* woman, Mr. Fitzy—" she said. He met her gaze with eyes of growing cautiousness.

"If there only were," he answered.

"Who—who will not doubt," said Birkie. Fitzgerald rose. "Though things look black," she struggled on, "have no fear, Mr. Fitzy."

"Well, I'm undecided on that head," said Fitzy, beginning to back away.

"Women stick closer than you think."

"Perhaps I'm beginning to see that they do."

A scream rang through the wood. Fitzgerald reassumed his air of watchful mastery. Voices began to sound upon the border of the wood.

"What's that?"

"Who did it?"

"Some one hurt!"

Cracking many sticks beneath his domineering feet, Fitzgerald strode out into the open. He found a little group of people gathered round old Roche, who, flattered by the commotion that he had commanded, was examining his finger in the centre of the group.

"Let's see," said Mrs. Vandravarte, who happened to be outside the ring of curiosity. She elbowed her way to old Roche.

"What a fuss about nothing," sounded the peacock tones of Mrs. Roche. "I thought he was killed, at least."

"What *is* it, Mr. Roche?" said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Oh, 'tis nothing, Mrs. Vandravarte; only a t'orn," he said.

"A thorn in his thumb," said Moira, laughing in scorn.

"Have you been picking gorse?" suggested Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Does anybody happen to be wearing gorse?" Fitzgerald's voice came from outside, where, taller than the rest, he looked over their heads.

Everyone looked at everybody else.

"Only Richenda," said Asphodel, "in her cap."

"And in her belt," her mother added. There was a pause, and her face changed.

XXIII

THAT evening, after dinner, from the bare fact that Sir Anthony had written to his Godmother, the condition of his feelings could be gauged. He sat before the dining-table, dismantled of its feasting presences, its flowers, its viands, its very cloth—and turned the letter over. He fancied that, to sensitive fingers, its acridity had penetrated to the surface of the envelope, which was rough, and gave him the same horrible sensation to touch as a sloe did to eat. Should he post it, or should he not? He knew that if he did not, the secreted virus of his mind would turn baffled inward, and work havoc there. He knew, too, at the same time, that although the envelope contained the bad taste of which his mental palate sought to be relieved, even the letter had not disembarrassed him of it entirely. As he frowned, and felt the envelope, trying to foresee the chemicalisation of his Godmother's mind brought into action with the letter, a movement in the doorway caught his eyes and ears.

There was Richenda in the same black gown which she had worn when he pursued her to her home, drawing on the same black gloves, and glancing, as she pulled

them on, in just the same way, lips parted, and wide eyes, at the clock-face in the coffee-room. He drew his breath, then looked up, and raised his voice. "Ah, Richenda!" he said.

She came towards him with the same languid manner of undaunted insolence.

"Going home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Passing the post?"

She paused. "I *can* pass the post," she answered, without the "sir."

"Post this letter, then," he replied, with a high chin, and without the "please."

She looked at him, she took it, and she went out.

Sir Anthony clenched his hands until the muscles cracked.

The same insufferable manner towards him, the same unbearable result! The woman was no less insolent, no less undaunted, no more subdued, no more respectful—after all those corks! After all those—prickles! He wanted to tear something to pieces, crush something, to relieve the irritability that tingled in him. History did repeat itself indeed!—in her manner, in its effect on him. Well, his mind replied with swift placability, history *would*—it could not help itself. It was a good thing, he supposed, for the vast majority who had bacon every day for breakfast, that it did! History was a habit—a kind of involuntary twitching of the same set of muscles. A set of universal circumstance arousing the

same set of ideas. A law of nature, incontrovertible. Some one would be bound to repeat it, even if *you* didn't. Some one would follow Richenda—to see where she lived, if he didn't—*was* following her, probably, now. The same arrangement of circumstances had involuntarily aroused the same set of emotions in Sir Anthony. Richenda went home automatically—the pawn moved by the unavoidable, invisible hand of Destiny. Amersham began to feel himself automatically advanced by the same finger. He had frightened her before, Richenda had admitted; he would terrify her again. He would punish her—he would make her suffer—and—why shirk the fact that History, in fact, would!

As Sir Anthony reached the tram-car into Dublin, it had a minute to wait before its starting-time. He drew his soft felt hat down over his eyes, and scanned the inside of the tram, before he boarded it. Richenda was not inside, so she must be out. Fortunate for him!—if he had had to scramble up the stairs, Sir Anthony believed she would have recognised his legs.

He screened himself behind a lady of mammoth proportions, with a large basket on her knee, the handle of which she contrived to work occasionally into his ribs. He suffered her for her convenience' sake. Then the tram started. The repeated sensation of its automatic jerkings—at the first time of his pursuit of Richenda, a new sensation to him—caused the same train of thought to recommence in him. Even so plebeian a creation as a tram was bound under the same great rule of repetition that controlled the

doom of kings. Was there not harmonious pleasure in fulfilling the habit of the cosmos? Was there not something petty in this desire of coherent atoms to disunite, and form a discord of dissent? Why this perpetual straining, argued his soothed mind, after an ephemeral originality which History, the record of the Ages, could not reach?

Who, then, was Richenda? Brilliant adventuress, no doubt, woman of intrepid insolence and resource. Should not the brain that had the power to disorganise the Imperial Hotel have had an equal power, in happier circumstances, to organise, cement, ameliorate—not the petty destinies of a family or two—but the destinies of nations? Force, like murder, Sir Anthony said to himself, will out. And a man of power, a woman of wit, will exercise his faculty, or hers, wherever the scene of it be laid; if the canvas be prepared or no—upon a large canvas or upon a small. Mysterious Richenda! was she a woman of the world, unaccountably come down in it, a woman of the people as unaccountably gone up?

At the corner of Harcourt Street the tram had stopped. From behind the mammoth basket, Amersham's alarmed round eyes looked out, as a stream of legs began to wind down the tram stairs from the top. How distinguish the skirts of Richenda from out of this tangle of heterogeneous drapery! At last he noticed a particularly discreet skirt descending. He rose and pressed past the basket—it was she!

As before, Richenda was in advance of him by a hundred yards or so, and when he had reached the

pavement, she was already some way down the street—a different street, he noticed, from the one which she had taken before. No matter, said Sir Anthony; all streets were alike to him. The waitress walked quickly, decidedly, with dignity, and yet with a little gay swing of the skirts which was very pleasant to look at from behind. Amersham trod softly, warily, but with a decision beside which that of Richenda would have seemed indecisiveness. She walked extremely quickly now, a habit to which Sir Anthony was not given. Again he found himself out of breath, as he pursued her down a dark and narrow way which led, he knew, to the quay-side.

A form loomed up out of a doorway on the opposite side, and crossed over to Richenda. Amersham paused. The figure was that of a tall and ill-clothed man of shambling gait, and shuffling boots. The girl stopped short, as he addressed her. Amersham turned aside beneath the shadow of an arch, and watched. Richenda listened with serious attention to what the shambling man was saying to her. They stood beneath a lamp-post, and the light revealed the man to be of sinister features and foreboding gesture.

Now, what hold, said Amersham to himself,—as the shade of Balzac descended again on him,—can that foul-featured man have on her bright young life? Some hold he has: she listens to him; he commands. She does not shrink, but she must hear him out. He lifts his arm—perhaps he threatens her!—If she would but call for help, and he might strike that man's arm down, so that he should

never lift it in menace any more! Richenda's hand crept out, and touched the hand of the man. He raised his arm—what!—he would attempt violence with her!—recrossed the road, and disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

In that man's hand, said Amersham, solemnly, half-aloud, the mystery of that poor child's life lies!

He had gained upon Richenda by her stop. There was only a few yards between them. Sir Anthony hastened after her. She was making straight for the quay-side, down the dark street. He came up almost beside her. "I—ah—I say!" he said.

"Go away," said Richenda, without looking round; "you're the same little beast that followed me before. I know the sound of your horrid little feet."

Amersham was silent, for he could not possibly deny that what she said was true. Suddenly she began to run, gasping out, "Go away!—beast!—policeman!"

Sir Anthony said nothing, but ran too. She crossed the road, and ran up to the stone wall of the quay-side that overlooks the Liffey; she fell back breathless against it.

"Oh!" she screamed, "it's—it's Sir Anthony!"

"Richenda," he began, "I followed you on purpose——"

"I know you did. How dare you?" she said, darting her head at him, with her words.

"Richenda, I—I have something to say to you."

"It was you that followed me before."

"I—I can't positively deny that, Richenda, because my—my memory, unfortunately, is not what it used to be."

"Frightened the life out of me! Chased me up and down, and drove me for shelter into a dirty house! You don't remember asking if a bull-terrier pup had passed that way, I suppose——"

"What are you talking about, my good girl?" he said, flushing proudly in the darkness. "I *have* no terrier pup."

"Oh, yes, defend yourself!" said the girl; "you invented a plausible pup, so why not a good excuse!"

"And *that*," he added arrogantly, "is *not* the way to speak to me."

She tilted her chin impertinently at him.

"If I don't feel respect for you, I don't show it," she said. "I'm not that sort. I don't respect you; I—I don't trust you. Why don't you leave the Imperial? Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I shall not leave the Imperial," he said in tones of stilted dignity, "to suit your, or anybody else's, convenience, if it pleases me."

She laughed sneeringly, full in his face. "I thought you were leaving. You told me you were."

"I fancy," said Sir Anthony deliberately, "it is *you*, my good girl, who will leave the Imperial before me."

She stopped short for a moment.

"What makes you say that?" she said in an altered voice.

"Because," he answered, "the Imperial has begun to find you out."

She laughed. "It's welcome," she answered recklessly, "to as much as it can find."

"You shall call me 'sir,'" he said, trembling with anger, "if I have to stay here all night to make you."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll not give the title of a gentleman to a man who's got no right to it, no, not if he was *Duke* of Amersham."

"Who are *you*," he said, with his voice unsteady, "to address *me* in this fashion? A woman who waits on people, and makes their beds, and takes away their dirty plates!"

"I'd rather have dirty plates than dirty tricks," said Richenda.

"Do you know," he said, "that no man or woman living has ever dared to speak to me like this before?"

She turned her back on him. "Pity for you!" she said.

He clenched his fists. "I—I——"

She had propped her chin on her hands, and was looking over the dark water. "I—I——" she mimicked him between her fingers.

"Woman!" he cried, "your whole reputation is in my hands!"

She smiled contemptuously.

"I have you in my power. I can get you turned out of the Imperial to-morrow. You're living a double life, Richenda."

"Kettle and pot!" she observed under her breath.

"What did you say? And what do you mean by that?" She was silent. "You are an intriguer—a spy! You followed me and Miss Vandravarte."

"Didn't!" she said, her chin still in her hands.

"Take your chin out of your hands, and stand up, when I speak to you! How dare you," said Amersham in a low voice, "follow a lady and myself, and spy upon our movements!"

She was silent. He heard her draw her breath.

"Answer me!" he said. Still she said nothing. "There is more," he continued. "Richenda—you've a secret with Mr. Roche."

"Which?" she said, with a little quick movement of the body.

"Which?" he echoed in a distressed voice. "*Which*, you say? You have with both?" She said nothing. "You have a secret with Fitzgerald Roche, I know."

"What if I have?" she said.

He walked about a little. "Disgraceful!" he muttured. . . . "Horrible intrigue. . . ." He came to a full stop. "What if I tell?" he said.

Richenda, facing him, drew an envelope out of her pocket.

"What if *I* tell?" she answered. Amersham paused, peering at the white square in her hand.

"What's that?" he said.

"Your Godmother's letter!" she answered.

XXIV

HE made a grab at it suddenly, and heard her taunting hoot of laughter.

"Come, my good girl," he said in the calm voice of desperation, "you should have posted it when I told you. Give me back that letter, Richenda."

She slipped it into her pocket, and chuckled with mischievous laughter.

"Bah!" said Amersham uneasily; "what could *you* tell?"

"What could I tell!" she answered. "Tell? Tell about your intrigue with a waitress——"

"By George!" said Amersham very slowly, "don't—do—that—my good girl—don't do that, Richenda."

"Sound well, wouldn't it?"

"Sound very well indeed," he answered hurriedly. "Sound quite particularly well, Richenda. But don't do that, my, my—dear; it wouldn't be—convenient, just now."

She began to dance a few little steps and sing a few little notes. "I've got her address. I've got her address—and how d'you know I shan't?"

"Why look here," he said. "I—I don't mind—ah—kissing you—if you promise—I don't really."

She broke off short, staring intently at him: then she cried out sharply, "I shall tell her *that*."

He drew back quickly. "Only a joke, my dear girl."

"A joke you're pretty fond of: about the only joke you understand," she answered meaningly. "It's getting rather an old chestnut. I've heard you try it more than once."

He leant against the stone wall, drawing a deep sigh.

"There's a class of people," he said pitifully, "which is incapable of deliberate jest—whose puns are all unintentional. That one, I assure you, Richenda, was purely accidental."

"There's a class that makes that excuse, I know, when their joke has gone too far," she answered.

"Again, there's another class of people," he went on, "who joke—because their hearts are aching. Perhaps, Richenda—you might give way to that kind of joke, if you weren't—very happy."

"Who knows but I have!" said Richenda, with a dare-devil and enigmatic note in her voice.

"You have?" he cried. "Richenda—you're—you're not very happy now!"

"Godmother!" said Richenda.

He exclaimed impatiently, drawing himself together.

"Pooh!" said Richenda with extreme scorn; "can't she make you sit up! I'd be ashamed to let a Godmother have that much hold over me."

"My good girl," said Sir Anthony peevishly, "you're talking, like all women, of what you don't understand.

She—she's a most unpleasant woman—really, you don't know—with the most peculiar notions that young men should behave——"

"A *proper* man," she replied, "would refuse to have a Godmother."

"My dear girl," he answered, "I can't help it, if I've got a Godmother, can I? Can you not see—it might be my misfortune, not my fault, and spare me a little pity——"

"Oh, I'll spare you a little pity if you want it," she answered in her mocking voice, "but it's not an article in much demand with our gentlemen customers."

"Yet I," he answered, "can understand and pity you, Richenda, for that dark shadow that falls across your bright young life, threatening your happiness."

She turned and looked at him.

"What are you talking about now?"

"I saw him cross your path, lift his arms and threaten you—a poor shuffling, shabby creature, that could throw a strange light on you, if he chose. If my Godmother has some hold on me," he said portentously, "that man has some strange claim on you!"

"Only for twopence," said Richenda. "I don't mind your knowing that much."

"H'm," he said thoughtfully. "You got off very well—very well indeed. I wish that I could get off for twopence with my Godmother. But it's—it will be more than that. It will be more than that." He sighed heavily, and drew his hand across his brow. "Richenda, I came

here to-night to talk to some one. And yet, I would not cloud your happiness, my child——"

"Godmother!" said Richenda quickly.

"Why do you remind me of that," he cried, "just now?"

"Because I know men," said Richenda. "And so long as it's 'my dear girl' you're all right; but directly it's 'my child'—you want a chair between!"

"I promise you," he said wearily, "there shall be no question of a chair between."

"You'd do well," she answered, "to grip hold of a likely promise that you *can* keep, when you see one. You don't find shipwrecked chairs beside the Liffey."

"Richenda," he exclaimed with sudden warmth, "your points of differentiation are too fine for me. Why should it be a question of a chair between you and myself—and a question of *no* chair between yourself and Mr. Roche?"

"Because," she answered, her voice tremulous with equal warmth, "Fitzy Roche is safe. I know a safe man when I see him—you're, you're—one wants a chair with you!"

"Believe me, Richenda," said Sir Anthony in the humble tone which invariably betrayed that he had found a picturesque aspect of himself, and meant to work it, "I am—I am not so dangerous as you think."

"I prefer to think it," she replied. "Directly I believe you're not—it will set you wanting to be."

Amersham drew back in his surprise.

"Strange woman!" he exclaimed, "who told you that? And yet," he added, "my nature craves for trust."

"Until you get it," said Richenda.

"Richenda," he replied in solemn tones, "it's a sad thing for a man, when he can find nobody to trust him."

"It's a sadder thing," she answered, "when he finds that he can't trust himself."

"One learns," said Amersham, "what one is taught."

"Who taught you to learn that?" she asked.

"A hard mother," he replied sadly. "Experience, Richenda, taught me."

There was a second's pause.

He twisted himself miserably before he spoke again.

"Richenda," he said, "my character is extremely complicated. Sometimes I despair about my character. You mentioned my Godmother. There is a case in point. Just now she is engaged in trusting me implicitly. I put it to you: what is a man to do in such a case? A man aware that his most salient characteristic is his contrariety?" Richenda seemed about to speak; he interrupted her. "Then don't you see what a cruel thing it is to pester a man, cursed with a contrariety of character, with trust? It is taking a liberty with me to offer me her trust; it puts me in the odious position of a pensioner—it hurts my feelings to be forced to accept her trust—*I* never asked for it. I came here, Richenda, under the ban of my Godmother's trust. It has forced me into positions which make me most uncomfortable—the very last positions in which, but for her trust, I should have found myself. The position," he added firmly, "in which you found me with Miss

Vandravarte on the occasion of the gorse party—that, Richenda—was *one* of those positions."

Richenda stood up straight. "Don't speak about it," she said in a husky voice. "I hated—oh, I *hate* that gorse party!"

"So do I, Richenda," he said, frowning; "the mention of it is painful to me."

"*Why*," she cried proudly, "did you make me draw all those corks?"

"I admit," he answered, "there—there were a good many. We will agree to avoid the subject of the gorse party. It—prickles!"

Richenda looked self-conscious suddenly. Sir Anthony observed it. "Richenda," he said slowly, "what was the matter with old Roche's hand?"

"He got a t'orn in his t'umb," she said, imitating old Roche's voice.

"Richenda," Amersham continued, "you'd a spray of gorse in your belt!"

She screwed up her face, pretending to think. "I believe I had."

"Your points of differentiation," Amersham said sternly, "are *so* subtle, Richenda, that I cannot attain unto them. Why am not I permitted to have prickles in my thumbs?"

"'By the pricking of my thumbs,'" Richenda began evasively.

"The *end* of the quotation is extremely apt," said Amersham with cutting dryness.

"Why, there," said Richenda quickly, "he was only trying to comfort me."

Without warning, she broke off and put her hands to her face.

"To—to comfort you?" said Amersham quickly. "What does a respectable old Twist-maker know about that class of business?"

She shook her head, without speaking, but he heard sniffs.

"Richenda!"—he dropped his voice—"you are not so happy as you wish to seem——

"Perhaps not—quite!" he heard her murmur indistinctly.

"Man?" said Amersham.

She nodded her head.

"Fond of him?"

She nodded it again.

Sir Anthony drew himself up to his full height.

"My child——" he began very solemnly.

"Chair!" she said through sobs.

"Richenda," he continued in the same voice, "is this man worthy of your love?"

"Why, there," she answered, searching for a dry place in her handkerchief, "he's such a horrid flirt."

"Take it from me, Richenda," Sir Anthony said slowly, "from one who is disinterested—this man will break your heart. He is not worth one of your tears. And he will cost you many—before he's done with you."

"Sir," cried Richenda, blazing suddenly up, "you'll

not say one word against that gentleman in my presence."

He paused. "Gentleman!" he said, with a whimsical cocking of the eyebrows. He continued. "Richenda, I impute no evil to the man: I warn you merely that he's dishonest and untrustworthy." As he spoke, he laid a firm hand on the girl's shoulder.

"You dare to lay one finger on me, when I belong to him!" she cried.

Sir Anthony drew back immediately. "My child," he answered meekly, "have no fear: you are as safe with me, as if you were beneath your father's roof."

"Sir," said Richenda earnestly, "let me go; you're doing me a wrong: you're doing *him* a wrong. What if he was to hear of this?"

"Richenda," he replied with equal earnestness, "pardon me: I would not harm a hair of your head. Believe me, it was of your welfare that I thought. Tell me, do you not know I would not say one word against the man you love?"

"Why, then, I know you wouldn't," she replied, with a gleam of the old mischief in her eyes.

"Richenda, go back to your home," Sir Anthony continued. "I will return you to it as safe as when you came."

"You know I can't," she answered, "while you're watching to see where I go!"

"Why this false shame with me?" he said. "I would

only take you there, and shut my eyes, while you went in—if you forbade it."

"I know you," said Richenda, "you couldn't keep 'em shut."

"Good-night, then, little Richy," Amersham said, holding her hand in his: she withdrew it with a sudden gesture.

"Don't!" said Richenda; "he calls me that."

"The mischief!" said Sir Anthony, "how did he think of it?" He drew a long breath. "Richenda," he said solemnly, "you have given this man your heart?"

Richenda nodded.

"One more instance," he observed, "of the man's pinchbeck, and the woman's gold?"

"How do you know," she said, "it's not my pinchbeck and his gold?"

He shook his head.

"He don't ring true," said Amersham.

"I wish he was here," she cried, "to hear the names you're calling him."

He smiled a sweet, sad smile.

"I wish that he were here, Richy—Richenda—to hear your defence of a man who has wronged you; who has proved himself unworthy of you—true woman that you are! I have never thought more highly of you."

"I'll tell him that," she said.

"Richenda," he said, looking out over the water, rip-

pled with black zigzags of shadow. "Before you go, spare me one moment of your happiness. Forgive me, if I give you pain. I came here to-night, I told you, because I wanted to speak to some one. To disburden myself of a confession. I—I am not what I seem,—no more than that man whom you love. I have come to the Imperial under false pretences—I cannot speak more openly to you, Richenda, but remember, you are the only one to whom I have ever opened my lips. My life is under a strange ban. I have not intended to deceive, and yet—to be frank—I have done so, desiring, as I did, some respite, some little breathing space, some unconsciousness of self."

"You're not *good?*" she asked him childishly.

"Don't be afraid, Richenda," Sir Anthony replied, "I am not a bad man. At least I never meant to be. No man ever started life with more wish to be good." He stared out with wide eyes of horror across the river. "But, oh!—whenever I shut my eyes—it—it floats before me. . . ."

Richenda shrank from him. "A *face?*" she whispered.

He nodded his head. "A face," he said in terrible tones, "that I have never seen."

"How could you see a face," she said, "that you have never seen?"

"I did see part of it," he answered.

"How much?" she whispered.

"The mouth," he answered.

"Can you remember it?"

"Can I remember it?" he echoed mournfully. "It haunts me, Richenda."

"What!" she exclaimed, "you did it in the *dark?*"

Amersham nodded.

"Sometimes I think that all the great deeds of our lives are done, Richenda, in the dark. Could we do them, if it were not so?"

"Sir Anthony," she cried, "you've gone and drowned some one in the Liffey!"

Amersham answered, smiling with a kind of grim solemnity, as he shook his head, "Richenda, if I could only drown it in the waters of forgetfulness!"

"Sir," she urged, "whatever you have done—begin again."

"It is too late—now," he said.

A clock struck suddenly close by.

"It's late enough—it's twelve," she said.

"Good night again, then, little Richy!"

"What did I tell you?" she returned.

"Good night, Richenda," he replied mournfully. "Then I have your word you won't betray me?"

"To your—*Godmother?*" she said.

"Word of honour?" he repeated.

She nodded her head. "I won't tell her, on condition——"

"On condition of what, Richenda?"

"That *you* won't tell," she answered.

Sir Anthony nodded his head solemnly too.

"It's a compact! Good night," he said, "that is—if

I have not robbed you of your rest. Tell me—*shall* you sleep now?"

She nodded her head at him through a long delicious yawn.

"Oh, like a top," she answered, with her hand to her mouth. "Like a top, Sir Anthony."

XXV

AS Richenda hurried through the hall of the Imperial on her way home that night, she had come into contact round a corner with Fitzgerald Roche. There was a moment's silence, while their eyes met. The eyes of Fitzgerald seemed almost to grip Richenda's, which looked helplessly into his, as if they could not get away again. She did not move, herself, but stood there, with a little ineffective fumbling movement, trying to find the buttons of her gloves. Silently, sternly, with cruel corners to his mouth, he breathed down on her, maintaining a rigid attitude.

"Yes, sir?" she whispered in a voice as helpless as her eyes.

The delight of tyranny sprang into his manly heart.

"Now, then, not gone yet?" he said.

"N—no, sir."

"You'd best get packed, Miss Richenda," he answered, "before you are sent packing."

He glanced about him in the dusk of the ill-lit passage, for faces that might lurk concealed. Richenda came a little closer, without speaking. It was the eyes of Fitzgerald now that reflected a sudden helplessness—the

fascination of fear. The sea-blue eyes looked up into his. Richenda laid a small and clinging hand upon his arm.

"I want to stay," she whispered, "for a special reason."

"You do—do you!" said Fitzgerald. He made a jerking movement, stared at her one moment, then fled away down the dark passage, his hands outspread, fetching his breath in gasps. On his way towards the drawing-room he brushed past something that moved; a pair of lambent eyes shone in the dusk. He pushed it from him in his fear.

"Another of 'em!" he groaned.

"Another of what, Mr. Fitzy?" replied the mysterious breathing accents of Miss Birkett. "You seem to be flying from something!"

"Birkie, I am," he answered, trying to brush past.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Fitzgerald," Birkie pursued in an uncertain voice. "Sometimes, I think——"

"Quite possible," replied Fitzy, "on birthdays and at Christmas——"

"We fancy," pursued Birkie, following him to the drawing-room, "that our endeavours to do right pass unnoticed—by our best friends; but they don't," she added, breathing hard, "they don't. And when I see a man, Mr. Fitzgerald, struggling in the—the bonds of some—some——"

"Some deadly thing that tracks him down," said Fitzy, trying to turn round in the narrow passage, without coming into contact with the person of Miss Birkett.

"Exactly," said Miss Birkett. "And when he makes an effort——"

"And escapes," said Fitzy, "from its confounded machinations.—"

"I've the greatest admiration for that man," returned Miss Birkett. "I almost envy him."

"By George, and so do I!" said Fitzy, turning and walking rapidly away.

He hastened to the smoking-room, the door of which was shut. Fitzgerald pushed it open, banged it to, flung himself upon a lounge, and groaned. A movement reached him at the far end of the room; he turned to see Miss Vandravarte, with flushed cheeks, crushing the red tip of a cigarette between her fingers into an ash-tray on the table. He sat up, pushing his fingers through his hair.

"Never mind," said Fitzy aloud, "what's one more or less!"

"It was only one," she answered with the massive dignity of her mother; "as a matter of fact, it wasn't that—I hadn't time."

"It was three of 'em," he answered.

"Three *what?*" she said in her contemptuous voice.

"Three women," Fitzgerald replied.

"Oh!" she said, turning down the corners of her mouth, and drawling. "Where?"

"Man!—you may well ask," he answered, glaring round him. Her brows went up as high as they could go. "'Tisn't where *are* they, but where aren't they? Man! they're following me; I can't get away from 'em."

"Really," she said, drawling still more. "Quite embarrassing for you."

"You'd say so," answered Fitzy, "if you were me. They wait for me in passages, and run into me round corners."

"I'd no idea how popular you were," observed Miss Vandravarte. "But I can safely promise you none of those embarrassments with *me*."

"I know it," said Fitzgerald quickly. "Though from the first my mother had designs on you for me——"

"Oh-h, really, that's quite news!"

"I never believed for a second *you* ever had designs on me."

"I assure you, you can make yourself quite easy on that point," she answered, with her contemptuous laugh.

"Thanks awfully," said Fitzy, with genuine gratitude. "Nor I on you." He leant forward, fixing her eyes with his. "D'ye mean it, really, though, when you say that's news to you?"

"What's news?"

"That the mater had designs on you for me."

"Certainly I mean it," she replied, with the corners of her lips turned down as far as they would go. "Naturally—it would never occur to my mother or me, that *your* mother——"

"Look here," said Fitzy, getting to his feet, "I'm going to have it out with you. I've kept things in too long. I'm like a balloon that's been a bit too much blown up with air. I've got to split to some one. And I tell

you, the sooner you clear out of the Imperial——" he broke off, and bit his finger tips, "the better, I say, for you."

She opened her lips, as if she were going to speak, then closed them again, and stared at him.

"The whole thing's kept together by a network of deceit and lies," he went on, pacing to and fro. "For one thing"—he shook his finger at her—"there are *you;* not daring to say what you think of the Imperial, because you're pretending you don't know it's Roche's Imperial Hotel; because my mother's pretending, first, that it isn't, second, that she don't know you know it is——"

"Really, Mr. Roche—I'd no idea——"

"Bah!" said Fitzgerald fiercely, "you know you had; you know your mother had. But she pretended that she didn't know, because she knew my mother didn't want her to."

"I am quite sure," she answered, tossing her head, "*my* mother doesn't know enough about the class of woman that your——"

"Stop a bit!" he cried. "I've got to work this out. It's Roche's Hotel, I tell you, bought, taken over, managed by Solomon Roche."

"Well, I'm sure, I don't see anything for you to be ashamed of in *that*," she answered in affected honesty.

"Don't you," he answered, "nor your mother? Well, you've only just stopped, if that's so. It was a pretty good joke with you, once. Old Solly Roche, manager, on the sly, of Roche's Imperial, and maker of Roche's Twist!"

"How do you know——" she began, confusion fighting in her face with offence and haughtiness.

"How do I know," said Fitzgerald, "how do *I* know—a man of *my* class, mind you!—your 'set': the set my mother'd move heaven and earth to get into? D'you suppose, now, the mater'd have squatted down in this place, if it hadn't been that she got wind of the fact your mother was running Sir Anthony to earth—here?"

"Really, Mr. Roche," she said, rising to her feet, with scarlet cheeks. "Isn't it enough for you to insult people of a class you know absolutely nothing about—people paying your father very well——"

"Go on," said Fitzy, grinning. "I'd no notion I'd get to admiring you as I do, for not being ashamed to show yourself as you are—for really saying what you really think. Your mother *did:* my mother did! Planted herself down here, I tell you, to get thick with the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte—and have it said——"

"I'm *sure*," replied Miss Vandravarte, "the Honourable Mrs. Vandravarte would be vastly flattered——"

"So am I sure!" said Fitzgerald. "She was; she is; it's the way to get hold of that class of woman, Miss Vandravarte. The way that class of woman that the mater belongs to, worms their way into a set that sneers at 'em, when they've sucked 'em dry as gooseberries, and flung 'em clean aside. It was very well planned, though I say it; the mater's got wits enough, if she'd invest 'em in Twist, not 'sets'—for she knew she'd bring down Sir Anthony Amersham with the same stone that brought Mrs.

Vandravarte down: the money we've made out of *Twist*."

"I'm sure," said Miss Vandravarte, with a swelling throat, "I've not the faintest notion why you keep me here, to let me into your trade secrets—and insult my friends to my face."

"Isn't it better," said Fitzy quickly, "to insult 'em to their faces than behind their backs? I've an object in this, Miss Vandravarte: I wouldn't be keeping you here, if I didn't believe there was stuff in you somewhere, that your mother's kept choked out of sight. But it's not your fault. There's something left out of your life—that you want to make it complete——"

She was arrested in spite of herself. "You're extremely clever," she sneered; "and pray, what do you think my life wants?"

"It's *Twist*," said Fitzy, "reduced to its simplest elements—it's Twist, Miss Vandravarte."

"Oh, thank you, so much," she answered, "but I flatter myself I can get on quite well without *that*."

"You've availed yourself of it right enough all the same," said Fitzgerald, "while you stopped in Roche's Hotel. But for Roche's Twist, where would your '*recherchy*' dance have been?"

"Oh, when it comes," she cried, "to throwing in my teeth the money you make out of Plug tobacco, that dirty old men roll in their hands—when it gets down to boasting of what you pay——"

"Wait a bit," said Fitzy, "comes to that, you were

talking a minute ago of what your mother paid my father, weren't you?"

"How dare you catch me up like that,—and *my* mother doesn't keep a hotel," she cried.

"No, but she's not afraid, all the same," he answered, "to issue all the invitations from it to my mother's dance."

"But for my mother," she flung back at him, "how would *you* have ever got to know good people?"

"Come, come," said Fitzy, "we won't get to that: I was only trying to show you—what I said: it's lack of Twist with you—that's all. But for the Plug that dirty old men roll in their hands, where would the motor be that drove you away to your dressmaker, off the spot where the mater had penned up Asp with Sir Anthony?"

"Oh," she said, "do you think I want to listen to the vulgar scheming of a woman like—like——"

"Mrs. Roche, of Roche's Hotel," said Fitzy. "Dare say you call her Mrs. Twist behind her back!"

She coloured furiously, at the truth of Fitzgerald's thrust. "And we'll keep Sir Anthony's name out of the question, if you please," she cried.

"Worst of it is, we can't," he answered; "he's mixed up in the whole mess. There's no bigger schemer in the Imperial at this moment, bar one—than Sir Anthony Amersham himself—and that's saying a fair lot. *He's* not going to marry any one—or if he does, he can't afford to marry for love—he's head over ears in debt."

"You mean to insinuate that Sir Anthony would—would condescend to Plug tobacco?" she said.

"I mean to say," he answered meaningly, "he condescends to make the most of his chances with it. You'd better make up your mind to listen; it'll do you a pile of good in the end."

"What has it got to do with me," she retorted furiously, "if your sister chooses to make eyes at Sir Anthony——"

"Aye," he replied, with meaning, "and what does it matter to Sir Anthony who chooses to make eyes at *him?*"

"You mean to imply——" she retorted, dishevelled with anger by now.

"'Tisn't a time for implying," he answered. "There's been too much implying already; you've not implied to me, and I'm not going to imply to you. I mean to say that your mother's been trying to hook him for you, as mine has been trying to hook him for Asp, and he don't intend to be hooked. He's on for a bite, I can tell you—and he's nibbled a bit all round. Yes, by George!" he added, breaking off suddenly, "how do I know he's not had a bite at *her* too!"

She tried to cover up her curiosity and discomfort with scorn.

"Had a *bite*, as you call it, at whom?"

"The woman," he said, "who's undermining the whole concern, who's at the root of all the mischief, who simply tricks the lot of us, who's schemed and plotted right and left——"

"You mean your——"

"I mean your priceless, your demure, discreet, your confidential and invaluable Richenda!" he shouted.

"Why!" she cried, "*Richenda*—it's ridiculous! She knows her place too well to dare—she's been with a duchess, Mr. Roche."

"There *is* no duchess. You mean to tell me you were hoaxed by a vamped-up duchess, too?" he said. "Shall I tell you how *she* got here? We were short of a hand when you and your mother came, when Richenda applied for the place. She'd not got a character to her back, she'd never been to a place before, but once, at the Duchess of Something or other's. If they didn't mind, she'd rather not tell them which! That was quite enough for the Governor; he engaged her on the spot. It was more than enough for the mater—a girl that had been with a Duchess! She'd only got to say 'Her Grace didn't like this, and her Grace didn't like that,' to get out of plain Mrs. Roche whatever Richenda liked and didn't like, by George!"

"As a matter of fact, I always hated the girl," exclaimed Miss Vandravarte, flushing hotly at this point. "I always felt that she was the kind of girl that would *spy*."

"The mater was sharp," continued Fitzy without heeding her, "but she wasn't quite sharp enough. She'd drawn several threads pretty tight, but she left one or two a bit loose. She'd shoved the Governor out of sight, because the Governor blabs a bit, and might talk about Twist and Plug. His soul is in his baccy, and she took away his Twist. She left out of account the fact that he'd got to find another plug for *that* gap. The plug that *he* found was—Richenda!"

"Your father, old Mr. Roche?" said Moira. "Why, he always looked so innocent——"

"He did, did he!" said Fitzgerald; "then you may take your davy, when he did, he was up to some of his divvlements. Good Lord, I've seen him look guilty enough, when no one was looking at him."

"It's literally unbelievable," she began, "that a respectable old father of a family——"

Fitzgerald rose to his feet, and paced. "Respectable old father of a family," he echoed. "Man, they're the worst of the lot! What I can't make out is, why, when every one in the whole place is conniving and contriving against some one else, how the dickens they've been tricked, one and all themselves! D'ye mean to tell me, you haven't seen the Governor trotting after her, to pull up blinds and put on coal for her, to save the lazy brute from lifting a hand? D'ye mean to tell me you haven't seen the old beggar blushing when she's mentioned——"

"I should never look for such scandalous things," she retorted, "in a respectable family hotel."

"You leave that word 'respectable' alone for the present," said Fitzy. "We're dealing with truths, you and I. And the truth is, the Imperial's *not* respectable; and the Governor ain't respectable either; strikes me, none of us are!"

"Then I think," replied Miss Vandravarte, with fluttering nostrils, "the sooner that my mother and I——"

"The sooner your mother and you know all about it, the better," he replied. "The things that I have seen and heard!"

"I shouldn't be surprised," she answered, with a sneer.

"I've had to keep my eyes open," he said, "when every one else's were shut. "You wouldn't believe," he continued, marking out his words, "the extent to which an old fool can be fooled. She's even got round him to let her have a sitting-room of her own. She spends time with him in the office. I've overheard some words, I've intercepted looks, I've seen her give the Governor the best cut o' the joint, and heard her prompt him for a quotation. The Lord knows what the woman *is*, and what brought her here exactly. But the fact is, she's got a power over the Governor: she's got a secret with him. And what that secret *is*," he cried, "I'm going to find out."

"Spare me that scandal at least," she said, trying to brush past Fitzgerald. "I never minded your father—he's all very well where he is——"

"That's what you women *are*," Fitzgerald said, barring her way to the door. "Always wanting to be spared something: to be spared thinking, spared the least scrap of worry, spared the sympathy that gives you the discomfort of a moment's heart-ache, spared the truth about things generally, most of all about yourselves. I'm not going to spare you. You've never tried, I bet, to spare me, or my people, the lash of your set's tongue. You say the Governor's all very well where he is; that means so long as he keeps in his place, and stumps up when the lot of you want to be amused, doesn't it?"

"You shall not insult me!" she cried. "Who are *you* to speak to me like that?"

"Who am I?—an honest man," said Fitzy. "You've never met an honester. They're more plentiful in tobacco factories, than in Dublin Castle. *You* want to be spared the truth—that I'm telling you for your good—but you don't want to spare me the pain of thinking, that nobody cares what *I* feel."

"I've never wished you any harm," she said half-sullenly. "I've always said you were more refined than your father."

"The Governor's all right," said Fitzgerald stubbornly, "or he is underneath—if you scrape off all that tom-foolery. There's not a kinder-hearted husband or father than the Governor used to be. What'd you feel like," he cried, striking the door with his fist, "if you saw your Governor dangled like a squirming worm on a scheming woman's hook, looking as if he liked it about as much as the worm—looking about as dignified?"

"I should be ashamed to see it——" she began.

"Aye, ashamed for yourself and your set—not for him," said Fitzy. "Well, *I'm* not made that way. And when it gets to giving her rings——"

"*Does* he do that?" said Moira, arrested.

"Does he do that?" said Fitzgerald, "aye, and admits it, if he wasn't lying to me, to spare her a charge of theft."

She looked into his face, with a more genuine expression upon hers than he had ever seen there yet. "How frightfully disgraceful," she murmured; "perfectly frightful for you!"

"I wouldn't mind the ring so much," said Fitzy, with clenched teeth, "if it wasn't for the prickles."

"Prickles!" she exclaimed quite naturally, taken out of herself. "Do you mean—his chin?"

"I don't," he answered, "they're natural there; but they're unnatural in thumbs."

"I don't understand," she began.

"No; but you will soon," he answered. "I'm going to have it out with the lot of 'em. I'm going to prick this monstrous bubble, if I burst for it. And the first thing to do is—get rid of Richenda!"

"Yes, turn her out!" she cried.

"There's not a person in the place," he said, striking one fist into the other, "that won't be glad to see the last of her. There's not one that wouldn't have got her the sack weeks ago, if they had dared. The fact is, they're afraid to." He broke off and turned to the door. "Well, you've lent some one a helping hand to-day."

"Lent whom?"

"Me," he answered. "Man! I couldn't have held it in an hour longer."

She tossed her head, to hide a passing look of gratification.

"You've been most fearfully rude to me," she said, "perfectly frightfully."

"I haven't," he answered quickly. "I don't blame you—I only blame your set."

"But naturally," she answered, moving to the door, after these scandalous disclosures, you couldn't possibly

expect Mrs. Vandravarte to stay on at the Imperial. I shall most certainly be obliged to communicate with Mrs. Vandravarte."

"Look here," said Fitzy, blocking her way to the door once more. "I'm awfully obliged to you. There's not another woman in the place I could have spoken to like that."

"I'm immensely gratified, I'm sure."

"I've a tremendous admiration for you, Miss Vandravarte," he said, "ever since you told me you had no designs on me, and because you've told me straight what you think of the Twist. Tell me, you think no worse of me for what I've said, and the Twist?"

She wriggled self-consciously—an outward expression of her inward desire to dodge the truth in herself. Then she shot her first glance of coquetry at what she would have called the "Tobacco-man."

"What if I don't think worse," she answered; "it doesn't prove that I *shouldn't*."

Fitzy held out his right hand, and gripped hers heartily. He put his left hand into his pocket, and laid something cool and square and hard in her palm. "I always have a few ounces knocking round," he said, "for any old chaps I may meet. Keep it, in memory of the first straight talk with a man you've had."

"What is it?" she said, uncurling her small hand. Then she exclaimed aloud, "Ah!—your horrid dirty old plug!"

"Sleep on it," said Fitzy.

XXVI

IT was useless to deny it to herself, but ever since Sir Anthony's Gorse-party, Mrs. Roche had felt that her constructive genius had failed, after all, to justify itself. Something, she knew quite well, had gone wrong. The threads that she had drawn together were dangling in her hands. She felt powerless to mend them, powerless to gather them up, shortened though they might be. She could not understand it, what had gone wrong exactly, what failed, and why; but her uncomfortable sensation of impending crisis grew stronger every hour. The more her inner certainty gained weight, the more she defied it by every vibrant effort in her power. Every hour she became more dominant and forceful, more strenuously vivacious. There was something terrible, even to her self-satisfaction, in exercising this conspicuous vitality in the middle of the atmospherical dead-calm of the Imperial. She would not, could not, speak to anybody of her fear. She was forced, she felt, to make some violent endeavour to win matters round. Mrs. Roche issued sudden counter-invitations to a "shell-party" on the beach, although she felt extremely misty as to how the party should vindicate its name. She

supposed they would all have to eat and drink out of large shells, which would be very inconvenient; and there would probably have to be a shell-gathering competition. At least a shell-party would be original, and would get into the Dublin society papers. And Mrs. Vandravarte had accepted, when Mrs. Roche had asked her, face to face, to come. The next day, however, the afternoon following on Fitzgerald's interview with Miss Vandravarte, the under-current of duplicity which had impressed itself so clearly on Mrs. Roche, began to bubble upwards to the surface.

Mrs. Roche was sitting on the verandah, which ran the full length of the hotel, in front of the dining and the drawing-rooms, and Mr. Roche's office. It was to one side of the office that Mrs. Roche had placed her chair. While she was wondering if it were possible to find, amongst the jewellers of Dublin, some kind of silver *bijou* box, formed like a shell, which might be presented to the winner of the shell-gathering competition—she heard the rustling of approaching silk, and Mrs. Vandravarte stepped out. Before she had said one word, the feminine perception of Mrs. Roche put every nerve in her body on self-defence. Mrs. Vandravarte was *so* sorry, but unforeseen contingencies had arisen, since her acceptance of Mrs. Roche's invitation to her shell-party. Contingencies that were most pressing. A dear old aunt—appendicitis, in fact—every precaution taken — never ate oranges — couldn't stand them — extr'ordin'ry!"

While she spoke, Mrs. Roche—nodding and smiling, as though the arrangement suited her exactly, and left her open to invite another guest—racked her brain to arrive at the solution of this new move.

So sudden! continued Mrs. Vandravarte; she and Moira were leaving the next day. Sir Anthony, she had heard, was leaving too. But, she should recommend the Imperial to every one: so secluded, so unpretending, something about the atmosphere somehow——

Low voices reached Mrs. Roche from behind her back, and to one side of her—a running accompaniment to Mrs. Vandravarte's words—

"The whole thing's out—I shall have to go."

Mrs. Roche sat up in her chair, bristling with vitality. Well, she declared, feverishly aloud, it had all been so pleasant while it lasted — quite a little home-circle! and she supposed the best of friends must part.—The voices continued—

"Didn't I screen you, pet, the best I could?"

Yes, in fact—Mrs. Roche continued at top speed, her gaze, which was fixed upon the sea before her, growing wider and tenser every second—*quite* a little home-circle! She could only hope that Mrs. Vandravarte had been as much benefited by the society and sea-air as she, Mr. Roche, her daughter, Sir Anthony, her son Fitzjur'ld, in fact *every one*. . . .

"Oh, you're an old darling—the marvel is, you kept our secret so well! I must—you'll let me this once, won't you——"

The clear impact of a kiss filled up a short, tense pause which had fallen between the ladies. To Mrs. Roche the presence of Mrs. Vandravarte seemed to grow and grow. Mrs. Roche rose. "Some one drawing corks in the office," she exclaimed at the top of her voice, as she made in haste for the drawing-room window. "Such an unpleasant noise—sounds so vulgar! Very early to be drawing corks. I wish some one would invent noiseless corks."

"I wish they *would!*" said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Corks seem so unnecessary."

"*Quite* unnecessary."

They disappeared through the French window, Mrs. Roche still talking at the top of her voice.

She went up to her room, and flung herself, sitting, with such force upon the spring mattress of her bed, that it shot her off on to the floor.

"How *dare* she—how dare he!" she muttered spasmodically, biting her nails, in the immense confusion into which she was thrown. "Servants! . . . governesses! disgrace . . . ruination! what *will* they think!"

There was a tap at the door. Miss Birkett entered, with swollen features, and indistinguishable eyes.

"I didn't think it would come to this, Mrs. Roche," she began.

"Come to what?" breathed Mrs. Roche.

"That I should have to give you a month's notice from to-day."

"Oh, what nonsense, Birkie—Birkie, don't be a fool,"

Mrs. Roche burst out, "you're always threatening to go, and never gone—you just pack your box, and unpack it, to annoy people. It's—it's out of the question," she finished tempestuously.

"It *is*, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie with intense significance.

"I must get to the bottom of all this——"

"I can only hope, Mrs. Roche," said Birkie at the door, "for your *own* sake that you never will."

Miss Birkett shut the door. Directly she had gone Mrs. Roche threw out her arms.

"Everybody knows everything!" she cried. "It's *Richenda!* And it's Solly—as well as Fitzy!"

XXVII

INTERRUPTING the reflections of Mrs. Roche, the Imperial bell rang for dinner, and on every hand, from both sides of the corridor, the guests began to emerge upon the staircase, with a casuality of airy conversation which was intended to conceal their desire for food, and steps that by their eagerness betrayed it. Mrs. Roche burst finally from her bedroom, conscious of spots of red upon her cheeks, and almost collided with the Vandravartes, who issued opposite simultaneously.

"Oh, at Lady Applehurst's, of course," Mrs. Vandravarte was continuing to her daughter, as she emerged from her room, "any one with the least breath of—breath of——" her eyes skimmed Mrs. Roche's face—she bowed, and swept hurriedly ahead, "anything like that, of course attaching——" her voice sank furtively, as she coiled herself, and her long train downstairs.

It seemed to Mrs. Roche as though the air of the Imperial were faint and heavy with the sickly breath of scandal. It overpowered her a moment; she caught at the thing nearest to her, as she went downstairs. Strangely enough, it was Fitzgerald.

"Fitzjur'ld," said Mrs. Roche, "where's your father?"

"In his room," said Fitzy, "and says he won't come out. I've had some words with him."

"Fetch him out," said his mother ferociously. "I hate a fool enough, but I hate a coward worse."

"Ssh!—no, leave him be," he whispered.

"Fitzjur'ld," his mother went on. "My husband may be a fool, and likely enough, my son, but that's no reason, is it, why *I* should be. I've found out everything——"

Fitzgerald stopped upon the stairs. "You have?" he answered, looking closely at his mother. "Well, so have I, and so have they."

"Who's they?" she demanded, standing on the mat at the foot of the stairs.

"The Vandravartes," he said.

"Who told them?"

Fitzgerald merely tapped himself upon the chest. "I—told Moira everything, told 'em about the Twist, and the Imperial, too. It's no good, mater, it's all out."

"That I should live to see the day," she cried, "when my own husband brings me to the dust, and my son betrays his mother!"

"Hold on, mater," said Fitzy, grinning. "I'm going to see this through."

Mrs. Roche hesitated a moment. It could be seen that she was thinking very rapidly. Her figure quivered electrically, then straightened itself out; her lips clenched, and her eyes seemed to shoot sparks of fire.

"Well, then," she said, "and so am I."

She twitched up the front of her dress, and before Fitzgerald could stop her, she had run up the stairs to Mr. Roche's room. Arrived outside the door, Mrs. Roche tried the handle. It went round, but the door did not open: it was locked.

"Solly!" she called loudly. "Come down out of that!"

There was no reply from within.

"Oh, I know you!" cried his wife—"hiding there from a woman, and not a word out of you!"

At this moment Asphodel came along the passage. "What's happened, mother?" she said; "the soup will be cold. What's father done?"

"It'd be as well for you, Asphodel," shouted Mrs. Roche through the keyhole, "if you didn't enquire *what* your father's done."

"Can't you get in? Perhaps he's shot himself," Asphodel suggested pleasantly.

"It'd be no harm, perhaps, if he *had* shot himself," Mrs. Roche replied to her daughter, through the keyhole.

"Perhaps we'll find him lying on the floor," continued Asphodel.

"Much more likely," returned her mother, still through the keyhole, "that we'll find him lying under the bed. I hear you," she added, "under the bed!"

"Ah, go away, can't you!" sounded the voice of old Roche, rather low, but very irritable, "and not be rattlin' the door!"

"Very well," returned his wife, "if you like to hide

from yourself, you can, but there's some one you can't hide from, and that's me, and something else you can't hide from, and that's the whole of your old Imperial Hotel."

"Go 'way, go 'way!" said Mr. Roche, approaching the door, and rattling the handle on the other side.

Mrs. Roche, who had retreated a few steps, came back to the keyhole again, charged with a new thought.

"I wish some one'd set fire to the Imperial to-night!" she said. Dignity and quietude returned to her, as swiftly as they had gone. She gathered up her skirts, and made a sign to Asphodel.

"It's a perfect sink of badness," she exclaimed, rustling quickly downstairs with her daughter, "the Imperial Hotel—and there's one thing that's not the least bad thing in it, Asphodel, and that's your father."

She entered the coffee-room, positively afire with zeal and threatening.

At the far end of the room, distanced from the common board of Roche and Vandravarte, in a chaste atmosphere of exclusive disapproval, sat Mrs. Vandravarte, and Moira. Fitzgerald was hopping about from one foot to the other, before the large table where the whole company was wont to gather.

Miss Birkett, seated, was awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Roche. Beside her sat the Fluke, conscious of atmospherical disturbance, and turning without ceasing, a coldly analytical gaze upon the pink eyes of Miss Birkett. At the end of the table, in an attitude of limp dejection, Sir Anthony was caressing the top of his head, with the palm of his

hand. He rose to his feet, as Mrs. Roche and Asphodel appeared, and waited for them to take their places, before he resumed his own.

Fitzgerald met his mother's eyes, and, perceiving the resolution with which she was packed, made her a repressive sign.

In the background, and forming a Dutch picture, framed by the wood-work of the buttery-hatch, Richenda stood, her eyes bright, her colour high, and all her gestures nervously alert. As she sat down, Mrs. Roche darted a look at her. Sir Anthony noticed the look, and glanced at Richenda, too. Asphodel, noting the direction of his glance, followed Sir Anthony's eyes. Fitzgerald saw his sister's movement, and was traced by the watchful Birkett to the common target where all their looks were aimed.

Every one noticed how Richenda flushed, cast down her eyes, and how her fingers trembled. Yet, nobody said a word. The silence was merely broken by distinctive swallowings, as the company's soup went down. The Fluke turned a face of intelligent enquiry upon her governess.

"Birkie, how is it *I* don't make noises with my soup?" she said.

"Because you've got a throat like a quarry, I suppose," said Fitzgerald. The Fluke merely scowled at him.

The joint was reached almost in silence. Sir Anthony broke it to enquire—

"Where is our kind host?"

"If you really want to know," said Mrs. Roche, "where

your kind host is, Sir Anthony, I believe he's under the bed."

Asphodel burst into shrieks of laughter, in which Fitzgerald joined. Sir Anthony was far too well-bred to act otherwise, than as if this piece of news was just what might be expected of a host. He inclined his head gravely, while he turned a guarded eye on Mrs. Roche.

"Birkie, why's pappy under the bed?" the Fluke cried, frightened out of her callous composure by this startling aspect of her parent.

"Little girls mustn't ask questions," replied Miss Birkett; "for some excellent reason, Fluke, no doubt."

"Richenda, we shan't want you!" said Mrs. Roche to the waitress. The girl withdrew at once.

"Sir Anthony," she continued abruptly, with a resolute ring in her voice: "a rumour has gone round the Imperial, that it's quite on the qui-vive that you may be leaving the Imperial—and I want to know, if the Imperial's been misinformed?"

Sir Anthony, deep in an abstraction, did not reply or raise his head for a moment. The eyes of everybody were directed straight on him—he felt them, and looked up suddenly.

"Ah—did you speak to me, Mrs. Roche?"

Mrs. Roche was irritated that he had not heard.

"Mrs. Roche wants to know, if it's true that you're leaving us?" said Birkie at one of his ears.

"Don't say you're going to leave us," Asphodel exclaimed loudly into his other ear.

He pulled himself together.

"Ah—did I say so? Yes, unfortunately, I fear that is so."

"It's a very strange thing," remarked Mrs. Roche loudly, and raising her head, to collect the gaze of the company, "how very satisfied everybody began by being with the Imperial, and how, suddenly everybody's started to be dissatisfied with the Imperial all at once."

She defied the company with her eyes.

"Here's Birkie," continued Mrs. Roche, turning upon her suddenly, and indicating Miss Birkett with a thumb, "comes to me suddenly, and tells me I must find some one else."

"Just don't mind her," remarked Asphodel. That's a little habit of Birkie's."

Miss Birkett, from fixing a steadfastly indignant eye on Mrs. Roche, turned it off, blazing with reproach, on Asphodel.

"I imagined, Mrs. Roche," she answered after a short pause, "that my affairs were as between you and me—I didn't imagine my private affairs were to be dragged into——"

"Oh, it's all very well, Birkie," Mrs. Roche interrupted her; "this is not a time for private affairs, or privacy of any kind. When it comes to Birkie telling me, I must suit myself some place else; Sir Anthony unfortunately being obliged, etc.—and Mrs. Vandravarte's dear old aunt's appendicitis, all on one evening!—joined to the fact, that she's gone and stuck herself down at the end of the room

again, as if we had the plague. . . ." She broke off, and waved her hands. "Well, it looks like something gone wrong with the Imperial," she ended. "What I want to know as *proprietress* of the Imperial Hotel" (here Asphodel opened the wide eyes and mouth of terror on her), "as *proprietress* of the Imperial," Mrs. Roche repeated, "as it's high time to tell you that I am; it's in my own interests, and the interests of the Imperial that I demand, and have a right to know—what fault, Birkie, what fault, Sir Anthony, what fault has *she*—Mrs. Vandravarte, to find with *my* hotel!"

"Bravo, mater! Bravo, Mrs. Roche, of Roche's Imperial Hotel," said Fitzy, clapping his hands.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Roche," said Sir Anthony, rising suddenly to the opportunity for a dramatic little speech, "fitly Mrs. Roche of the Imperial," he bowed over the table-cloth, "you are putting a mysterious construction on a simple fact. The best of friends must part; the best of times must end; the best of the summer is over, and the best thing we can do is, to put the best face we can upon the matter, and, in short, to make the best of our way home."

He expected applause, on his conclusion, but none broke out, for everybody was too much frightened by the unexpected behaviour of Mrs. Roche.

"We did our best," continued Mrs. Roche, regardless of Sir Anthony, "to make you comfortable——"

"And succeeded admirably, my dear Mrs. Roche," said Amersham.

"We tried in our small way to entertain you to the best of our ability——"

"But, my dear Mrs. Roche," he began, turning a half-humorous, and entirely puzzled face upon the others.

"Is it the beds?" Mrs. Roche demanded rapidly.

"Most certainly——"

"Is it the food?"

"Could not possibly——'

"Is it the *attendance?*" Fitzgerald enquired suddenly.

"Ah," replied Mrs. Roche, turning upon her son. "Come, now!—it's not a time for privacy, as I said before, and it's not a time for sparing people—no, nor it's not a time for mincing matters—is it *Richenda?*"

There was a dead silence all round the table. Miss Birkett broke the silence with something like the groan which goes up from a crowd of villagers, when a criminal who has outraged their community is shown to them.

"*Ah-h,*" she said, fixing her eyes upon Fitzgerald.

"Of all the——" began Mrs. Roche.

"Schemers!" said Birkie.

"Sheep's-eyes!" said Asphodel.

"Double-dealers!" exclaimed Mrs. Roche.

"Spies!" said Fitzy.

"Liars!" said Mrs. Roche.

"Thieves!" concluded Fitzgerald.

Every one paused to draw breath; every one looked at everybody else. Alone amongst them, Sir Anthony had not spoken, but merely rolled his helpless eyes in the direction of each fresh witness against Richenda.

"There's for your invaluable Richenda!" Miss Birkett breathed towards Mrs. Roche.

"The confidante of legendary Duchesses," added Fitzgerald.

"The kind of woman you could *trust!*" sneered Mrs. Roche.

"Mother, what has Richenda done?" said the Fluke.

Sir Anthony turned helplessly, speechlessly, side-wise to her, as a child, bewildered in a crowd, turns to the friendliest face.

"Birkie, take the Fluke away," responded the Fluke's mother. Birkie did not wish to leave the table of her enemy's accusation. She hesitated—

"One of the servants"—she began.

Richenda appeared in the doorway. Simultaneously, the whole party seemed to feel that she was there; simultaneously, their eyes fastened avariciously on her.

"Richenda, take Miss Margaret to the nursery," cried Mrs. Roche, "and we shall not require your services again."

Sir Anthony rose spasmodically in his chair, and sat down again.

At sight of the ogress, Richenda, tears of terror burst from the Fluke. Richenda, blushing vividly, put out a little strength, and bore the Fluke away.

"You see," muttered Miss Birkett to Mrs. Roche, "the very child cowers before her!"

"Bah! great sheep's-eyes!" said Asphodel.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Fitzgerald, rising in his

chair, as the door shut behind Richenda, "we are met together to-night in a common cause. We are uniting our combined strength to a common end—for the common weal. Each of us has his own deep-seated grievance; each of us, till now, believed himself to be the only sufferer. Ladies and gentlemen—unawares, the enemy has crept into our peaceful camp. Each of us heard his entrance, and stirred uneasily in his sleep, grasping his weapon at his side, hiding his own suspicions from his comrades. But the call to arms has sounded. We have sprung to our feet, to a man, inspired by the same deadly determination: to charge, to scatter, and to oust——"

"*Richenda*," the company breathed up from one common throat.

"A common cause," continued Fitzy glibly, "makes common candour—an open secret, open hearts. Why should we any longer conceal from one another the private wrongs we nurse, the impositions practised on our simplicity, the advantages taken of our credulity?"

"I appeal to you, Sir Anthony," broke out Mrs. Roche, "as the family friend I believe you to be—I conceal it from you no longer in spite of the intense pride of a Roche—I put it to you, as a man of the world: is a woman of any proper pride, of any notion of what's due to her, to permit her husband to miss no opportunity of getting his arm round a waitress's waist? Is she to sit still, while he squeezes her so tight that he gets gorse-prickles in his thumb? Is she to sit still—the mother of a family—while he shuts her up in his office

and drags her in the dust——" She brandished an arm in the direction of Mrs. Vandravarte—"before *her!*"

"Wait a bit," said Fitzy, grinning, "who got dragged in the dust? Mrs. Vandravarte, you, or Richenda?"

"Is he to make me eat dust before that woman!" his mother continued, at the top of her voice's speed—"let alone knowing about Roche's Twist and the Imperial an' all—to have them talking all over Dublin about the airs Mrs. Roche gives herself, for all that her husband makes love to servants, and is heard kissing her in loud pops——"

"What," exclaimed Birkie, in the unconscious terror of the moment, with dilating eyes and nose, "*old* Mr. Roche, too?"

"Well!" cried Asphodel, "I'd never much notion of father—but when it comes to that! What a dreadful, disgusting old man! It's well for him, mother, that he's under the bed. If you ask *me*, it's the best place for him to hide his head!"

Sir Anthony's face, meantime, grew whiter and more drawn. He did not say one word, but sat there, staring at the cloth.

"The fact is," said Fitzy, clearing his throat, "the Governor means very well, but he's a bit soft, and that's a fact; and that—that schemer has him wound around her finger, like a spool o' silk. I always knew," said Fitzy, half shame-facedly, "that there weren't many lengths o' tom-foolery a man wouldn't go to for a woman, but when it comes to *that* far——"

Suddenly the smouldering volcano of Birkie's indignation burst its bounds.

"Oh!" she cried, "when it comes to *you* talking——"

"Yes, I know," said Fitzy quickly—he ran his fingers through his hair, and blushed: "hold on!"

"When it comes to *you* making yourself out to be a pattern. When you were seen—*seen*——"

"It might be a staggerer about father, soft as he is," said Asphodel, "but you couldn't get me to sit up, for the breeziest tales you could tell about Fitzy and girls——"

"Now that's exactly what I want to get at, too," cried her mother. "Out with it, Birkie; this isn't a time for false shame."

"If you'll give me a chance," began Fitzgerald.

Sir Anthony turned his drawn eyes on Fitzgerald, waiting for him to speak.

"She—she *did* make some advances to me—and I'll—yes, I'll just tell you why!"

The door opened gradually, and the face of old Roche appeared round the corner of it. A chorus of exclamations broke out at his appearance. From the bottom of the room, the Vandravartes looked steadily on.

"Oh, so you've come out from under the bed, have you!"

"Three cheers for the Governor!"

"Ah, you're an artful old boy, *you* are!

"Sit down, Governor, and shed the light of your countenance on a spot where we want some light. There was a bit of a story I was telling. Mind you, I mean, a plain tale——"

"Is it all out?" said old Roche in a hoarse voice, and looking round him carefully. There was a burst of laughter at this.

"Aha!—wasn't he smart at jumping to conclusions!"

"Yes, everything's out and up——"

"Then, where's she gone?" demanded old Roche of Sir Anthony. But Amersham was speechless still.

"Just hold on a minute," said Fitzy. "Birkie and I were telling the tale between us. *What* was it, I was seen doing?"

"Persons," Miss Birkett blazed out at Fitzgerald, "who happened to be on the spot, saw you, Mr. Fitzgerald, on the night of the dance with Richenda, and overheard words—'you won't tell—on your honour——'"

"Yes, I know—wait a bit!"

"And saw you—*saw* you kiss her——"

"No," cried Fitzgerald, rising excitedly to his feet, "it's not true, Miss Birkett. Richenda tried, succeeded, I believe, in kissing me—shall I tell you why?—to come round me, for her own ends." He turned a stern eye on his father. "Somebody here—can tell you why, if they will!" He paused.

"Because," said the old man to Sir Anthony, "Fitz-jur'ld found Richenda with a certain ring——"

"A ring extremely like my mother's engagement ring," Fitzy went on, fixing his father with a judge's finger, "which I caught her turning round on her hand——"

Amersham's eyes were fixed on Fitzgerald; he leaned across the table, drawing his breath hard.

"I caught her in the act," said Fitzgerald, "in my mother's room. My mother's jewel-case was lying open."

"Wait a bit," cried old Roche, looking almost beside himself; "Richenda 'll have something to say to that, Sir Anthony."

"She had," said Fitzy; "she said, she meant to steal it."

A groan went up from the company.

"I heard steps," he continued, excited by the sensation he was creating, "outside the door. I locked the woman in—I went out and found my father. I told him what I'd seen; he replied, Richenda had a right to the ring. The ring was hers——"

"So it was—it *is*," cried his father, struggling to rise in his chair. "The joke has gone too far. I——"

"It *has*," said Fitzy, "when I tell you my father said, he had given Richenda the ring!"

"Well!" exclaimed his mother, "of all the——! A common servant—and I might ask him for rings till I was black in the face——"

"She's *not* a common servant," protested the old man.

"I went back," continued Fitzy, hushing him up, "to Richenda. I told her what my father said. She turned round and replied, that it *was* hers."

"So it was," his father shouted again, full in Sir Anthony's face.

"I warned the woman, she would have to leave. That the game was up. She cried, of course, and said she didn't want to go and——and approached me for the purpose, as she thought, of dissuading me from my intentions."

"That's *one* version, Fitzy!" commented his sister.

"It's the only version," he cried stoutly. "Now, the question is this: did Richenda intend to steal the ring—and my father, guessing it, try to cover her with the excuse that it was hers? Or, was the ring Richenda's, and Richenda preferred to pretend she meant to steal my mother's similar ring, rather than admit—the ring was given her by my father?"

"Well, anyway, whatever she intended, she put it back," said Mrs. Roche, looking at the half-hoop ring upon her hand.

"Of course, she put it back," exclaimed old Roche indignantly.

"Look at that!" said Fitzy, tripping him up. "He admits, she put it back!"

They all burst out laughing.

"Is there no gentleman here," demanded old Roche of Sir Anthony, and trying to rise, "who'll stand up, and defend a lady from the accusation of bein' a common thief?"

There was another burst of laughter.

"*Prickles!*" said Mrs. Roche.

"*Lady!*" said Asphodel. Fitzgerald forced his father down again.

"Well," Asphodel continued, "if you ask me, a more scandalous affair—between the two of you—it'd be hard to imagine. But I always knew," she turned excitedly to her mother, "there was something wrong, the minute I set eyes on father, directly he'd engaged Richenda, didn't I?

What'd I tell you, mother? 'Father's blushing,' I said, and 'I believe he's been kissing her.'"

"Yes, you did," rejoined her mother; "so did I. I said he had a secret, didn't I? He used always to blab whatever was told him—but he's kept this secret well enough."

"Well," declared Asphodel, "we've paid through the nose for her, all of us. I'd always heard of the sins of the fathers being visited on the poor children, but this is the best example yet——"

"Little did I think," cried Mrs. Roche, "when I countenanced the engagement of that—that woman, that she'd be the means of ruining my position in society, spoiling the reputation of my hotel, and turning my own son and husband from the paths of virtue——"

"Oh, fie, fie, fie!" cried her husband.

At this moment the two Vandravartes, having risen from their table, sauntered with loud silken rustlings to a door of exit, which was close beside the table where the Roches and Sir Anthony sat. Old Mr. Roche sprang to his feet, and caught Mrs. Vandravarte by her net and sequin sleeve, which, giving way in his excited fingers, sent a volley of cold beads rolling down his shirt sleeve.

"She's—she's sending her away," he cried, pointing to Sir Anthony, "and there—there *he* sits!"

Mrs. Vandravarte turned a stare of voluminous virtue and contempt upon him.

"You've torn my sleeve," she said angrily, shaking herself free of both old Roche, and the jet beads. "What are you talking about, Mr. Roche—sent whom away?"

"Rich—Richenda. And look at him," he cried, repeating himself: "there he sits!"

"I should think he *did*," she answered with a loud contemptuous laugh.

"Will you listen a moment, Mrs. Vandravarte," cried Mrs. Roche.

"Just take a chair for a moment," said Fitzgerald, "both of you."

"Why," exclaimed Asphodel, "we've been making the most scandalous discoveries about that innocent-looking treasure, Richenda."

"You do not surprise me in the least, Miss Roche," returned Mrs. Vandravarte, with lips and tone that turned down simultaneously, as far as they could go.

"She's stolen things," said Mrs. Roche.

"Now you remind me," said Mrs. Vandravarte, "I have missed at least half a packet of hair-pins. Scandalous ingratitude, after the excellent dress with only one small hole in it I gave her!"

"I believe she—she spies on people; I *know* she does," said Moira—"and I believe she's worn my hats."

"To my positive knowledge," said Birkie, "she's worn Mrs. Roche's clothes. And, if you'll believe me——"

"Oh, I'm *quite* sure that we can," said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"She's taken off," said Birkie, waving her hands, "the gait and manner of her benefactress behind her back."

"Mrs. Vandravarte," said Mrs. Roche, "to tell you the damage and the mischief, the havoc that girl has done——"

"I can quite imagine it would be an extraordinarily difficult task," replied Mrs. Vandravarte, with a glance of scandalised matronship at Mr. Roche. "I have long divined it, Mrs. Roche. To tell you the truth, it has become literally impossible for me, under the circumstances, to countenance such things, or appear to lend my approval to such things, as I cannot, in fact, possibly, under the circumstances—a—a—countenance——"

"Well," exclaimed old Roche, almost in tears of despair, "of all the back-bitin' and scandal-mongerin'——"

"Look at *that*, now!" cried his wife.

"Come, now," said old Roche, making a step towards the door, "I'm going to send for the girl herself——"

"Stop!" cried Sir Anthony, in such peremptory tones, that every one was silent, and the old man's arm fell to his side. Amersham rose to his feet with a drawn, set face. "I protest!" he said. "I protest against this slandering of—the lady that I love!"

XXVIII

"WHAT, another!" cried Mrs. Roche.

"Merciful heavens!" Birkie breathed. "*Three* of them!"

Old Mr. Roche burst into loud roars of delighted laughter, and banged his fists on the table, saying, "Bravo, Sir Ranthony, that's it; bravo, sir, I say!"

Fitzgerald nudged his father with his elbow. "Shut up, Governor," he said furiously. He leant forward, speaking under his breath to Moira: "That's a good 'un, you know," said Fitzy; "the best yet, by a long chalk."

"Well," said Mrs. Vandravarte, attempting to rise from the chair where she had fallen back, "if I was ever in my life in such an asylum for criminals and lunatics!"

The supreme effort of the dramatic moment past, Sir Anthony had collapsed into his chair again, assuming an attitude of complete despair. He began to speak through the hands that partly hid his face.

"I would ask you all—to stay for a few minutes!" he began. "I have something to say to you—which cannot any longer be postponed. You see before you—a man driven to the last depths of despair; a man pursued by one idea, haunted by one persistent thought and dream—

Richenda." He raised his face, and stared before him, hollow-eyed. "I came here," he continued, amidst the dead silence which had fallen, "drawn by Heaven knows what intricate machinery of Fate!—a free man. Free, that is, in heart. Free, I repeat, in *heart*. Ladies and gentlemen," he said, striking the table with one hand, "I owe it to you, at last, by way of reparation, explanation, as the only atonement and excuse left to me in my power, to confess to you that when I came to the Imperial, I came among you under false colours. I *am* not free. I am—already married!"

Complete confusion followed. There were outcries of protestation from old Roche, exclamations of dismay and indignation from the ladies. Amersham half rose again, brandishing one hand, completely carried away by the great situation, and the consternation it had caused.

"Married!" exclaimed old Roche. "Oh, come, Sir Ranthony, ye're not that surely!"

"As good as married," Sir Anthony replied, "hopelessly, inextricably—engaged. Ah! you may laugh," he continued fiercely, then wearily, to the old man, "to me—it is no matter for merriment. I came here, I tell you, free in heart, but not in life. I am bound, ladies and gentlemen, to a lady under conditions which, I thought, I dare not break.

"I—suffice it to confess to you—by my own fault, I became a year ago involved in very considerable financial difficulties, difficulties which taxed my endurance, my ingenuity, the little fortune that I have, to the very last

extreme. Finally, it became necessary—for the honour of my name—to take some one trustworthy into my confidence. When a man is in real trouble, he does not open his heart to another man, he tells it to some woman. I had a friend, tested by years, whose genuine affection for myself I had every reason to believe in and rely upon. Although this lady had promised, before I could be expected to keep my word, much less to utter it, that she would be held responsible for my good conduct, until I should take over that solemn charge myself—yet, somehow, my courage did not falter at the prospect of admitting to her, that I had failed to fulfil what she had promised for me.

"I told that admirable, but slightly exacting and eccentric lady of my difficulties. She promised that she would see me through them all: that in the future I need have no fear—except through some ingenuity of extravagance—of any possibility of their recurrence. But upon one condition. A condition which filled me with despair: a condition which inwardly I felt to be impossible, abhorrent. A condition, however, which be it to my dishonour to confess—I promised—promised to fulfil.

"At the time of which I am speaking, this lady had adopted, since she had no children of her own, a niece of hers, whose parents had recently died. She confessed to me, before making me the offer to which I have referred, that all her hopes, all her ambition, all the love of which she was capable, were wrapped up in this young lady—and in myself. In short, that, before her death—a

contingency which, she assured me, was not far distant—she desired with all her heart to see her niece made Lady Amersham. She wrought, I may say, upon my feelings, by speaking of a hidden malady in herself which she had never mentioned before—which, I may also add, has never declared itself more openly since then. She asked me, seeing this contingency of her approaching death, and what she was prepared to do for me, had I the heart to refuse her this last request, the only favour which, truly, she had ever asked of me?

"I repeat, I promised her this favour—ladies and gentlemen, no inconsiderable one! When she had my promise safely, she continued to clinch the necessity for keeping it, as she thought, by telling me that if it were broken, now that it was made, she would not leave one penny of her money to me. My embarrassments, also, would remain unsettled. She further worked upon my sense of honour by telling me that, if I broke my word, it would not only be the ruin of myself, but of the lady who was to be my wife. I should, therefore, deprive her equally of the least share in her aunt's will; that she would bequeath every penny of her fortune to founding, in her name, a Home for Dogs. Further, that if her niece disappointed her, and failed of the brilliant expectations she had formed of her, I should be the means of turning this young lady out of the only home she had."

He leaned heavily upon the table, and concealing his face from his absorbed audience, went on again.

"At the time of this eventful and most singular visit,

the young lady on whom so much depended, was under the same roof as her aunt and myself. Until, however, she became an orphan a few weeks ago, she had been living with her parents abroad. So that, until that hour, I had never seen her. At the end of the conference I was invited to see for myself if she were not worthy to decorate the name of Amersham: if she were not all that her affectionate aunt had painted her.

"At the thought of seeing her before me, the embodiment of all my future hindrances and regrets—the open coffin, waiting for the decease of all my bachelor liberty and aspirations—I formed upon the instant an abhorrence of her—a confirmed objection to even seeing her. The thought ran through me, that here, then, perhaps, was the *one* opportunity my future afforded me of avoiding Lady Amersham. I invented an immediate cramp, which obliged me to leave upon the spot. I took my hat and gloves, and left, I regret to say, while she was in the very act of telling me of all my wife's accomplishments. Her aptitude, I believe, she mentioned, for private theatricals. How she was one of those distracting things in wives, a creature who can do simply everything—and is in consequence invariably doing it.

"I went abroad at once, upon a plea of ill-health, which would defer my marriage, promising her faithfully, which, I am glad to say, I *have* been able to perform, to report myself, my health, my pursuits and conduct to her every week. I was even ridiculous enough to send her niece a conventional, half-hoop, diamond ring, which cost

me forty pounds, in token of our unfortunate engagement, and as some consolation for my cowardly refusal to meet her face to face.

"But meantime, my embarrassments, unsettled, grew more embarrassing. I was haunted by a nightmare of marriage, which would not let me rest—it hung over me all day, like an impending storm; at night it crushed me like the nightmare of a mountain, troubled my dreams, like undigested food. I crept home in illicit stages—still writing to my Godmother. I even sent her an emaciated photograph of myself. But I have displeased her by the postponement of my marriage; by my evasiveness, my general, and obvious discontent. I admit it—I am afraid of her."

He sighed the sigh of a man whose life, overshadowed by some great care, is partly relieved by its disclosure.

"The rest—you know almost as well as I. I found this little haven of peace—where I could study and, as I thought, forget. But there was one thing that I had not reckoned on, the thing which has upset all my calculations, thwarted the honestest intentions of my life—the contrariety of character that I was cursed with from my birth.

"Because I had a position to maintain, and she had none. Because I was an Amersham, and she a waitress. Because she never was, refused to be, impressed by me. Because I was bound, and she was free. Because, I admit, perhaps, of certain suspicions about her character, which gave me to understand, I had no chance whatever compared with—

others. Because she has mocked me, defied me, and because the whole thing is so utterly impossible from every point of view—I found I could not live without Richenda. Richenda inspired me from the first moment I set eyes on her, with a feeling which no woman ever roused in me. You have thought me moody and uncertain, gloomy and cynical, sometimes. I would ask you to try for one moment to picture the state of a man's mind—on the one side haunted by pressing liabilities, disgrace, and a warped conception of a most unnatural duty. On the other, haunted by the need for resistance against the impulse of a passion not to be withstood. Nevertheless, I am here to-night," he cried, standing upright at the table in the excitement of the moment, "to tell you that, with any encouragement from her, I am prepared, fully prepared, to renounce all my expectations—to meet my embarrassments like a man who has got to make the most of them with his own unaided efforts; to face the outraged susceptibilities of my world; to be branded as a gentleman who has ruined the life and prospects of a lady, and turned her homeless, penniless into the world. I repeat, I am prepared to face my ruin, in order that this—this——" turning defiantly to her accusers—"this intriguer and adventuress, this—this waitress whom you call a thief, should, if she will, become—my wife——"

At the conclusion of his speech, he sank once more into his chair amidst incredible confusion and dismay amongst the party, mixed with loud hand-clappings, bursts of laughter, and cheering from old Roche.

"Three cheers," he cried, "for Sir Ranthony! That's what *I* call a man."

"The whole thing's a perfect travesty," said Birkie, "a scene out of a screaming farce."

"He's doing it, he *must* be doing it for the joke of the thing," said Moira.

"I like that," cried Mrs. Roche, pointing almost wildly to her husband, "three cheers, Fitzjur'ld, for the man that's got *him* off, and has turned the blame on himself."

"I wish you joy, Sir Anthony," said Mrs. Vandravarte, rising, with the camel-smile and a signal to her daughter to depart, "of the notorious Lady Amersham, but you can scarcely expect *me* to call upon a housemaid."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Vandravarte," he cried warmly, "but I cannot have the lady even referred to in that way. For, in spite of your evidence, in spite of undeniable indiscretion on her part, I refuse to believe that Richenda is not the very soul of honour."

"Hear, hear!" shouted old Roche again. And he banged with all his might on the dinner-table bell.

"Somebody stop him, somebody stop him," said Mrs. Roche, fighting hysterically with her hands in the air, as though she were attacked by an invisible swarm of bees, "or I shall go mad."

Richenda appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were feverishly brilliant, her colour very high. At sight of her, there was no escaping the truth: the redoubtable Richenda was alarmed.

"Did you ring, sir?" she asked in a small voice.

Every one turned round: a volley of exclamations were directed against her.

"Aha, madam, so there you are!"

"Picture of sweet innocence!"

"I want to settle my account, Richenda."

"Pity her Grace isn't here."

"Richenda," said Solomon Roche, still roaring with laughter, "you've got the sack."

Her lips trembled: she looked all round. She was not quite the Imperial Richenda she had been.

"Why, what have I done to you?" she said, drawing closer to old Roche.

"Sir Ranthony's got something to say on that head!" said old Roche, pushing her away from him.

"What has she *done!*" said Mrs. Roche, appealing to the company.

"Spied on people," said Miss Vandravarte.

"Shown the most abominable ingratitude for kindness, and stolen hair-pins, to say the *least* of it," said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Imitated her patrons and employers," said Birkie.

"Lied, deceived everybody, left and right," said Mrs. Roche. All round the table a perfect fireworks of recrimination went off. "Duplicity!—Deceit!—Ingratitude!—Stealing!—Lying!—Scheming!"

"Where's your Duchess *now?*" said Asphodel, putting her face close to Richenda's.

"There—there—is no Duchess," said Richenda helplessly, and with every sign of tears. There was an

outburst of, "Oh, isn't there! I should think there wasn't! Then how dare you pretend there was!"

Amersham took her by the arm, and drew her towards him and away from old Mr. Roche.

"I couldn't help it," she said, lifting her eyes to him. "I wanted the place—and I had no character——"

"It is scarcely necessary, I think," said Mrs. Vandravarte in prodigious tones, "to tell us *that*."

Old Mr. Roche turned on her sharply.

"Now, I'll not hear a word said against her," he said sharply.

"In—deed!" said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"Will you listen to that?" said his wife.

Amersham held Richenda by the hand. "This is not right, or kind, or just," he said, addressing the whole room, "since I am still your guest—to the lady whom, I have just told you, I love sincerely!"

"Ah!" said old Roche to Richenda, chuckling, "will you hark at that, pet?"

"*This*," said his wife, "Solomon, is the *last* straw that broke the drowning man!"

"Moira, come away," said Mrs. Vandravarte under her breath.

Amersham turned, and looked old Roche from head to foot.

"Go it, Sir Ranthony," old Roche replied to the look. Amersham turned to Richenda, and spoke to her, as if they were alone. From sheer fascination Mrs. Vandravarte and Moira could not get away.

"Do you hear," he said gently, reverently, "what I said?"

She looked down, shaking her head over and over again, and biting her lips.

"The lady I respect," said Amersham, "whom I love sincerely, whom I sincerely trust."

She started, jerking her hand free in his. "No, no!" she said.

"Richenda," he said, bending in enquiry towards her. "Why no?—Why not?—Ah! it's—it's the other man!"

"Oho!" said Fitzgerald at this point, in a low voice, to Moira, "is it? The question is—which other?"

"That man you love, who calls you Richy!" he continued gently, heedless of everything about them. Still Richenda did not speak, or turn to him, but bit her lips, and looked away.

"You trusted me," she murmured.

"I do trust you," he replied.

"And I wrote and told your Godmother," said Richenda quickly.

He drew back from her, staring at her.

"You told her?—You?" he said.

She nodded helplessly.

"But—but how did you know where she was?"

"Your letter," she answered; "you gave it to me to post."

He sat down suddenly, with an exclamation of despair.

"Oh!" he cried, "you gave me your word you wouldn't——"

"Yes, I know—I know! Listen! forgive me!" said Richenda, wringing her hands. On the impulse of the moment, she went down on her knees, and tried to take his hand.

"For pity's sake!" said Mrs. Roche, pointing at them.

"A pretty sight! The loves of Sir Anthony and the housemaid!" commented Mrs. Vandravarte.

Upon her knees, Richenda turned on Mrs. Vandravarte.

"What do I care for you and your tongue, and what you think," she cried fiercely, "when I love him, and he loves me!"

"There's a fine-spoken young woman," cried old Roche fervently.

"Richenda!" said Sir Anthony. For a moment they grasped each other's hands. Then he shuddered, and turned away. "You have betrayed me—broken your word to me—*you*——! You were the only woman I believed in. I believed in you in spite of everything. I can never believe in a woman again."

"Oh, forgive me," she cried upon her knees; "it was for your sake—against myself I did it. I saw—I saw this coming. I feared lest you might care, and because I love you so much; for fear I should be tempted to give way, I wanted—yes, I wanted to save you from myself."

"Ah, I'm done for now," he said, bitterly: "everything is ruined by this last blow: my life, my hopes—what chance have I——"

"Oh, oh!" Richenda said, "it was *because* I couldn't bear to spoil your life—can't you see?—couldn't bear to see you ruined!"

Amersham rose, with a dreadful decisiveness about him, and in a certain hush which this display of feeling had brought about amongst the company.

"Never mind, Richenda," he said slowly, "you meant well, no doubt. I had hoped, at least, to hide the unfortunate—the state of my feelings from my Godmother, until time might soften her anger, and I might approach her skilfully and gradually. But now, it's useless—we must make the best a—of this—this business. We must escape from here before she——"

"You can't!" said Richenda, with the incisiveness of despair. "She—she's on her way. She'll be here in a few minutes."

"And time she came," said Mrs. Vandravarte.

"And thankful I am to hear it," added Mrs. Roche.

Asphodel turned to Moira. "Did you ever hear the *like* of it?" she said in an exhausted voice.

"Quite as good as a play!" said Moira. "Rather better."

"Wait a minute," said Amersham to Richenda. "You say that my Godmother will be here?"

"Any minute," she answered in a low voice, and glancing at the clock in the same way as he had so often seen her glance before.

He laid his hand heroically on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid, my child," he said. "I will stand up for you."

"I'll stand up for myself," she said stoutly. "It wasn't my fault you fell in love with me. I did my best to stop you. There's no blame attaching to me. I'll just tell her—I did it for your sake. I think she'll understand."

The door opened slowly, and the waiter with the corns put his head cautiously round it. "A lady to see Sir Anthony Amersham," he said; "says she won't give her name."

"Go," said Sir Anthony, thrusting Richenda towards the French window; "wait outside a minute—till I call."

"Shall I take my cap off?" she whispered in a flustered voice.

"No—keep it on. But go," he said. He turned to the waiter with the corns.

"Show the lady in!" said Sir Anthony.

XXIX

THERE entered very quietly, a quietly dressed lady of dignity, distinction, and unobtrusive manner, marked in no way whatever by the vivid eccentricity and excitability which the Roches, at least, had expected to discover in her. As nearly as was possible in a lady of her elephantine proportions, Mrs. Vandravarte succeeded in springing to her feet.

"Dear Lady Dunemer," she exclaimed, in great excitement. "So just like you. Do tell me how you manage it—always saying and doing everything—just at the right moment! Extr'ordin'ry!"

Lady Dunemer nodded to Mrs. Vandravarte, took in all the Roches with one glance of her eyes, and went straight up to Amersham.

"Just like you; how very like! This visit is too kind!" he murmured. "Lady Dunemer, you know Mrs. Vandravarte already—my host and hostess, and my friends, Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Roche, and their daughter and son."

The Roches rose in a body, like Sunday-school children from their forms, when the rector's wife appears, and bent towards her from the waist. Lady Dunemer

nodded at them with an absent mindedness which was the one clue to her state of mind, and turned immediately to Amersham. "These people!" she exclaimed quite audibly, "are they to hear?"

"They have already heard," Sir Anthony replied, "and are acquainted with the object of your visit."

"Indeed!" she answered, scanning his face quickly; "then I may safely conclude that you, too, are equally acquainted with that object?"

He nodded his head gravely, once.

"You have been trying," she said, with rapid incisiveness of manner, "to dodge me for a year."

"I—I cannot deny it, Lady Dunemer," he replied.

"You told me you were ill."

"That," he answered gravely, "was certainly untrue."

"You're as fit as a fiddle!" she cried.

"I am thankful to say," he answered, "I was never better in my life."

"It was pure cowardice!" she exclaimed.

He nodded. "Something like that," he replied.

"Very well," she continued, counting off her statements on her fingers. "You remember our conversation a year since, on the subject of my niece?"

"Perfectly, Lady Dunemer, I regret to say."

"You remember the promise of exemplary behaviour which you made me, as a test of, and a preparation for, the solemn state you were to enter?"

"And I have *kept* that promise," he said proudly, "with—with a very few exceptions!"

"Nevertheless, this morning," she continued, "I have a communication in an illiterate hand, signed a 'Well-wisher,' putting me in possession of highly derogatory, and unbelievably scandalous facts concerning you; begging me to lose no time in saving you from their disastrous consequences."

"So I am told," he answered.

"Who told you?"

"A Well-wisher," he replied.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"This insinuation of an intrigue with a—with a housemaid?"

"It is not a case of insinuation," said Amersham, a little hoarsely, "of intrigue, or of a housemaid. It is a case of plain speech, true love, and a lady whom fate compelled to be a waitress."

She stopped short a moment, and looked down thoughtfully upon the floor. "He's—he must be out of his mind," she said meditatively to the carpet.

"Then you—you defend your position?" she continued quietly. "You have told the lady who makes beds, of your love?"

"I will not have the lady referred to in that way," he cried. "The lady in question has, to the best of my knowledge, never made a bed. But, if that should be the case, it shall be my care that in the future she should never make another."

"What sort of a woman is she, this bed-maker?"

Lady Dunemer went on. "What sort of a character?"

There was a subdued titter from the whole company behind.

"You may partly gather her true nobility of character—" he began.

"What's that?" said Lady Dunemer, turning sharply to the audience behind.

"From the fact," Sir Anthony continued, "that the letter you received this morning warning you against this lady——"

The tittering in the background grew more and more pronounced.

"I repeat—the letter warning you against this lady," he cried, his voice waxing warmer and more loud, "was written by the lady herself! Who, knowing my love for her, knowing the true state of her heart for me, yet preferred that her own heart should break in silence, rather than that she should be the means of ruining my life——"

"It is time, I think, that some one else, some one with a more—more balanced judgment," Mrs. Vandravarte said, rising at this point, "should acquaint Lady Dunemer with a few *facts* about the lady of Sir Anthony's choice."

Sir Anthony's Godmother turned on her abruptly. "What do you know about her?" she said sharply. "Tell me!"

"Simply that — that——" she began, blushing and glancing at Amersham.

"Sir Anthony's not the first!" said Miss Birkett.

"You may partly gather the fact of her true nobility," said Mrs. Roche, "from the fact that she's ruined the reputation of the Imperial Hotel."

"I protest!" exclaimed Sir Anthony, indignantly.

Then the ruthless chorus—each of whom was fraught with separate bitterness other than their several injuries at Richenda's hands—broke out once more.

"She's stolen——"

"Spied——"

"Lied——"

"Worn peoples' clothes——"

"In short, my dear Lady Dunemer, the woman is outrageous!" said Mrs. Vandravarte in termination.

Lady Dunemer turned to Sir Anthony.

"You hear?"

"No, I don't," he cried. "I am here to defend that lady's honour—to swear to her honesty against all charges to the contrary. And I am prepared further to maintain my absolute trust in her integrity, by giving her the highest proof of my belief and my affection in my power——"

"Exactly!" Lady Dunemer interrupted, "by letting the unfortunate woman alone for the future."

"By making her my wife," said Amersham.

"There!—Listen!—What did I tell you?—What did I say?" the chorus broke out again.

"H—ssh!" said Sir Anthony's Godmother. She paused for a full minute. "You realise what that means?" she said.

"I realise it perfectly."

"You realise what will be said of you, in reference to my niece?"

"I—I am forced to realise that, too."

"That you've broken her life, ruined all her prospects, made her penniless?"

"It would be impossible to express the regret, the—the remorse——"

"And lose the one chance of your life," she said, turning away from him, "for a woman who spies and lies and thieves—— Wait," she concluded, turning round. "Bring me this bed-maker!"

"No!—certainly not," began Sir Anthony, "until——"

"Bring me the—lady!" she said.

Amersham went to the French window. In a moment he re-entered the drawing-room, leading by her bent arm—for both her hands were pressed before her face—the recalcitrant Richenda. Very slowly he led her, with her shoulders heaving, to Lady Dunemer.

"At least," commented Sir Anthony's Godmother, "she knows what sort of caps to wear!"

The audience gathered furtively behind her—hushed and silent—all save old Roche, who could not restrain his chuckles.

"I ask you," said Richenda through her hands, in a broken voice, "to—forgive me, my lady—I love him—and I did it for his sake——"

"Come, come," said Amersham softly, trying to draw down her hands, "you mustn't be afraid——"

With a sudden gesture Lady Dunemer put out her hand, and pulled away Richenda's fingers.

"*Hermione!*" she cried. Before any one could say a word, Richenda, in one movement of her arms, had thrown them round the necks of Sir Anthony and Lady Dunemer and brought their heads together.

"Wasn't I the dearest darling in the world to take the whole lot of you in?" she cried, shrieking with laughter, and dancing up and down. "Oh, you must give me a certificate for plate-washing, Anthony. Promise—promise you will."

"So *that's* where you've been all this time?" Lady Dunemer cried. "You—you! . . . I don't know whether to shake you and shake you, or kiss you and kiss you. No, but really, Hermione, it's a great deal too bad. You liar, and spy—er—you——"

"Bed-maker!" cried Richenda.

"Well, that's the best one ever I knew in my life," cried old Roche, bursting into fresh roars of laughter, "divvle a better! Didn't it work out very well? I was never so pleased in me life!"

Sir Anthony sat down on the sofa, and laid his head weakly against a cushion.

"Why, man, what ails ye?" said old Roche, slapping him on the back; "ye're not that conthrairy that ye don't want her, now ye've got her?"

Richenda ran to his side. "Oh, do you want me, now you've got me?" she cried. "Tell me quick, please Anthony, if you don't."

He passed his hand through his hair, till it stood up like the bristles of a shaving brush. "Wait a minute," he said to the party which was forming curiously about him: "a little air! How is it? Who did it? What's it mean?" He pointed at Richenda. "And what's *that*?"

"Oh, if that's all, I can soon tell you what *that* is," said Lady Dunemer. "Mrs. Vandravarte and Mr. and Mrs. Roche, may I introduce you to my dear niece, the Honourable Hermione O'Mahony, and the future Lady Amersham——"

"Late of Roche's Imperial Hotel," added Richenda, curtseying to them all.

Sir Anthony rose, and pulled down his waistcoat with the air of one newly awakened by the callous dawn. "No, I don't call that *fair*!" he said in commonplace tones.

"H'm! That's what *I* call making a fool of a man," said Fitzgerald, rather hotly.

Mrs. Vandravarte, Mrs. Roche, Birkie, and the two girls, murmured amongst themselves, gazing meanwhile at Richenda with mingled suspicion, animosity, and reverential fear.

"If you ask me," said Asphodel in an aside to her mother, "it's downright common mischief-making."

"Not what I should call at all ladylike," said Mrs. Roche, in Birkie's ear.

"Simply frightfully cheapening," remarked Moira.

Mrs. Vandravarte turned to Richenda, with an accentuated camel-smile. "My dear Miss O'Mahony," she said,

"how could you be so clever, as to take us all in? *I* can't imagine how you *do* it——Extr'ordin'ry!"

"Your powers of mimicry, Miss O'Mahony," said Birkie, "are something *marvellous*."

"Here," said Richenda, stepping forward, and taking hold of old Roche by the arm, "is the real hero of the moment. Anthony—Aunt—everybody!" She threw her arms round his neck. "I do thank you—you're an old brick," she said.

"For nothing, pet — er — Miss Richenda-Hermione. Don't mention it," he murmured, looking round the corner of his eye at Mrs. Roche. "What harm, 'twas nothing; 'twas good for me. I venture to assert 'twas good for all of us. 'Twas the making of the Impeeryal Hotel. I'd do it again to-morrow for you with pleasure."

"I can't tell you," said Lady Dunemer, leaning forward short-sightedly to look at him, "how grateful I am to you, Mr. Roche, for what you've done. And now will you be so very, very kind as to explain quite slowly to me what it *was*?"

"He's the Martyr of the Cause," Richenda cried, laughing mischievously. She went up to Mrs. Roche, and took her hand. "Will you forgive me," she said, "for kissing him—how often was it—twice? I couldn't truly help it—he was such a dear."

"Oh, Solly's not bad," said his wife, looking guiltily remorseful, "but I'd like to know what in the name of fortune has he done, to have all this fuss made over him."

"Nothing—nothing," answered the old man, blushing

furiously, and he glanced at his daughter and wife; "only tried to cheer her up, when things were lookin' a bit black for—for herself an' Sir Anthony."

Richenda took his right-hand thumb, and looked at it. "It isn't in it *now*, is it?" she said, anxiously.

"What isn't in it?" said Lady Dunemer, leaning forward, "a bullet, Hermione? He wasn't fired upon?"

"No, only a gorse-prickle," answered Richenda.

"I declare to goodness," said the old man to his wife, blushing, and expanding in the admiration which had been so foreign to him of late. "I was ashamed o' me life, Maria, to look ye in the face."

"But why should he be ashamed, Hermione," enquired Lady Dunemer, "to look her in the face?"

"Ye see, Lady Dunemer," said Mr. Roche, "when Richenda came about the place, it struck me, first go off, when I saw the soft little hands of her, that she wasn't used to the work. So I put a couple o' questions to the child, on account of her havin' no papers, and refusin' to tell me where she came from——"

"So I let him into the whole secret, aunt," cried out Richenda. "Somebody had to know. I knew I should be stupid, and make mistakes, and perhaps a bit of mischief, and might run the risk of being dismissed—so I squared the Proprietor to back me."

"The best person to square," remarked old Roche. "Wasn't she the great little waitress! And didn't I tell you always, 'twas bound to come right in the long run? I declare I'm very proud to see this day."

"You poor dear old Martyr," she said, "what can I do for you?"

"Ask me to the weddin'," said old Roche. He turned, with a sly chuckle, to his son. "No chance of a double weddin', I s'pose, eh, what?" he said.

Fitzgerald blushed vividly. "Not the ghost of a chance, Governor," he said. "Not a ghost of a chance in the world!"

"*I* don't know what your father's talking about," Miss Vandravarte commented loudly to him.

"Blest if I do," he replied.

Old Roche turned back to his wife, half-shyly. "Old Solly ain't quite so soft as he looked, eh, Maria?"

Mrs. Roche shook her head, and said nothing.

"What, Maria," he whispered, "ye're not vexed with me still?"

Suddenly she threw her arms round his neck.

"I drove you under the bed!" she cried.

Mrs. Vandravarte turned her lorgnette full on the old man.

"I don't know how you concealed it all this time," she said. "I can't conceal things. Extr'ordin'ry! You must really tell me where to enquire for the—er—Twist."

"Where to enquire?" he said warmly. "At every tobacconist's, town or village, North, South, East, and West of the Old Country."

"Solly," whispered his wife, squeezing his hand, "strikes me the Twist's going to have a boom."

Under cover of the general conversation, Richenda

was talking to Sir Anthony, as she sat beside him on the sofa.

"No, but, Richenda," he was saying. "All the same, I don't quite understand how you got here, and *why* you came."

"Why?" she answered, holding his hand. "You ran away from me."

"Oh—not quite *ran*, Richenda."

"You refused to see me, and you refused to meet me, and I was dreadfully in love with you. So what was I to do?"

"But you'd never seen me," he said.

"I saw the photograph you sent my aunt, in which you tried to look consumptive, to get out of marrying me."

"Oh, indeed, indeed, Richenda, so far as I can recollect, I wasn't *really* very well."

"And you tore up the photograph my aunt sent of me, before my very face."

"I assure you," he answered, "I have never ceased to regret it. It was such a fascinating mouth. It haunted me!"

"*Was* it?" she answered, "really? Absurd, romantic man! So you posed as being my murderer, because you thought that might impress me!"

"I really did," he answered innocently. "You were afraid of nothing, Richenda, in those days, and I wanted to make you frightened of me."

"But listen," she went on. "I made up my mind what

I was going to do, when you wrote to aunt for the first time from the Imperial. We were in Dublin at the time. I told her I was restless, and I was going abroad for a time. I wanted to be alone. As luck would have it, I saw Mr. Roche's advertisement for a waitress that morning in the *Times*. That was clearly the finger of Fate. I made up my mind that I'd get that place. And I hired a room in Dublin on the chance, and bought the most becoming caps and aprons I could find."

"I never saw such caps!" he murmured.

"I set them all at you," she said reproachfully; "they were a perfect set of lobster-pots to catch you in; and sometimes I despaired of catching you."

"Richenda, I swear to you, they were my desperation from the first. But for those caps, I never—no, I never——"

He had risen from the sofa at these words; he blushed, and sat down again abruptly.

"Oh, Anthony," she said reproachfully, "how *could* you! I was *told* you did, and I came, for one thing, to the Imperial to see if it was true, and I found—yes, I discovered that you did flirt."

"Dearest Richenda," he said, taking her hands. "Only a little, now and then, because—and come now, Richenda, what about yourself?"

"Only once. I only kissed him once—his cheek," she answered quickly, "because—of your contrairiness. I wanted you to hear of it."

"Exactly!" said Sir Anthony, extending a protesting

hand, "why I tried to kiss"—he dropped his voice—"you know!" he turned upon her—"spy!"

"Thief," added Richenda plaintively, holding up her ring to Amersham's eyes. "I wanted so to wear it—your ring, and I never could—at Roche's."

"Listen, Richenda," said Sir Anthony, looking anxiously into her eyes. "There is no other man who calls you Richy?"

"Baby!" she answered, making a little face at him; "the other man was you!"

"Oh! I'm so glad," he answered, "for I shall never call you anything but that!"

"No, I'm not happy!" she cried suddenly.

"Oh, Richenda," he said humbly, "nothing I have done?"

"Ought I not to be angry with you," she said, "for flirting with a waitress, when you didn't know that it was *me*?"

"No, Richenda," Amersham said earnestly, "you ought to be pleased; for after all, although I didn't know that it was you, it *was*!"

THE END.



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